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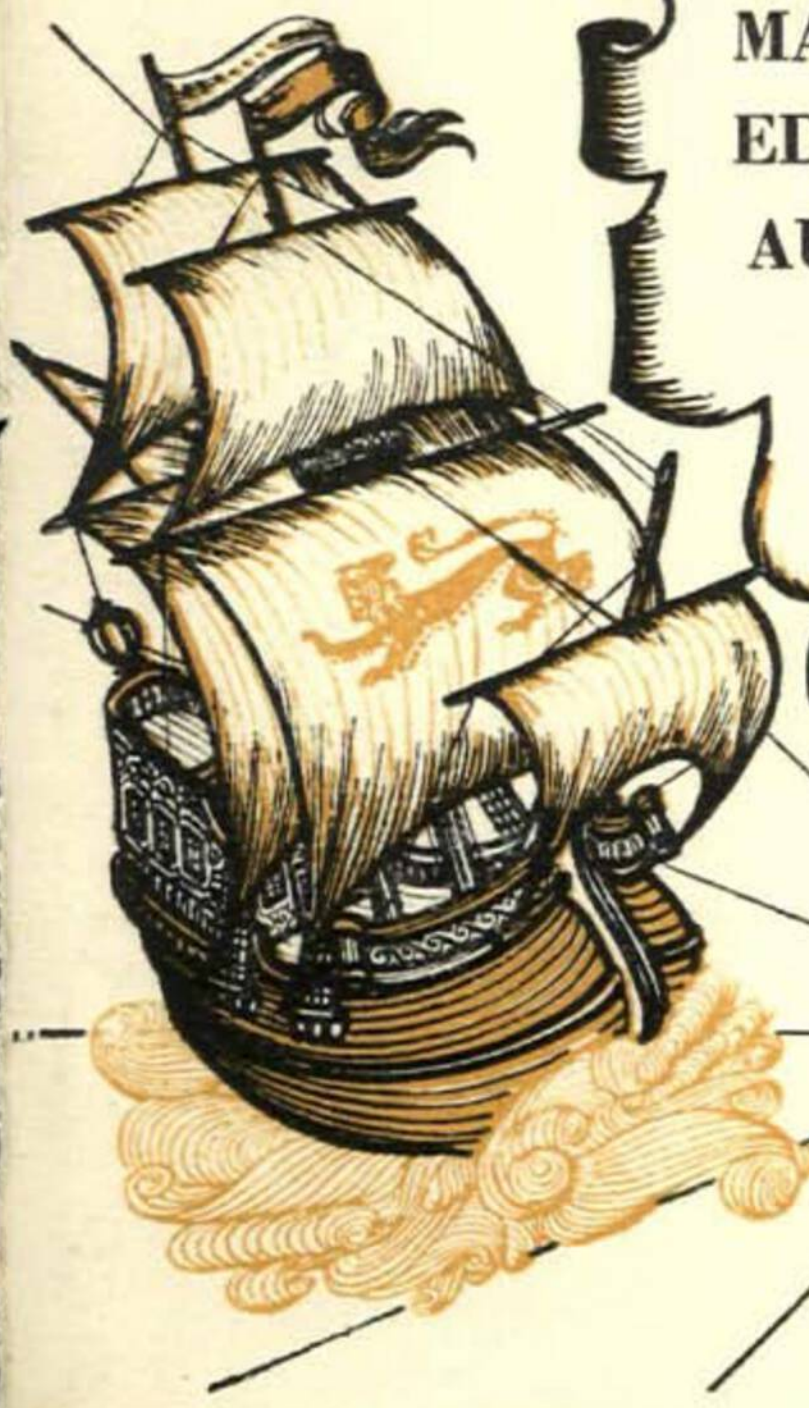

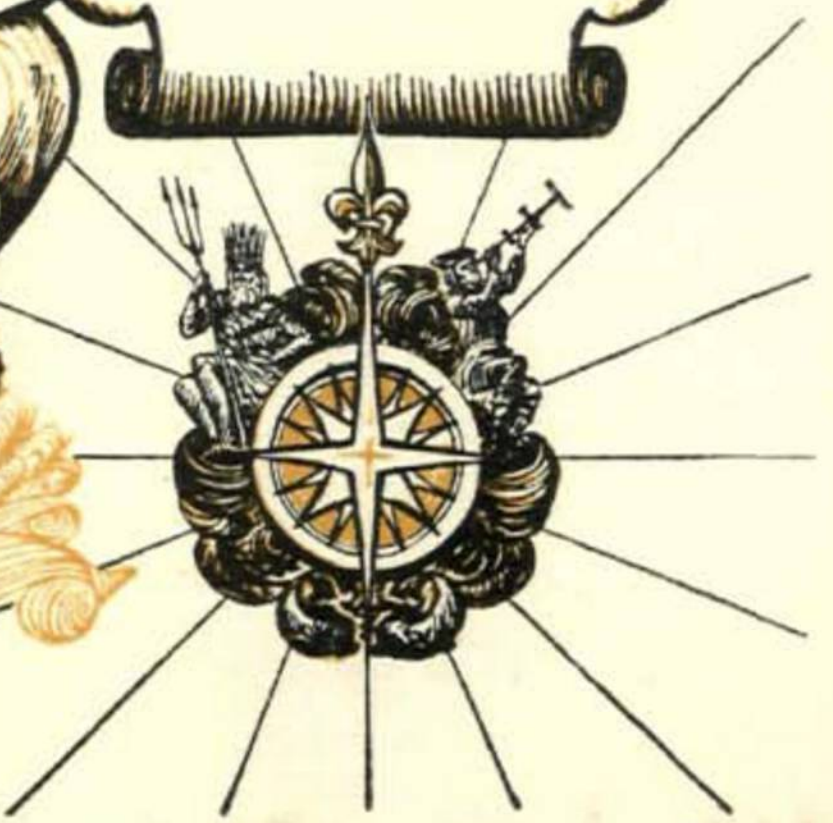

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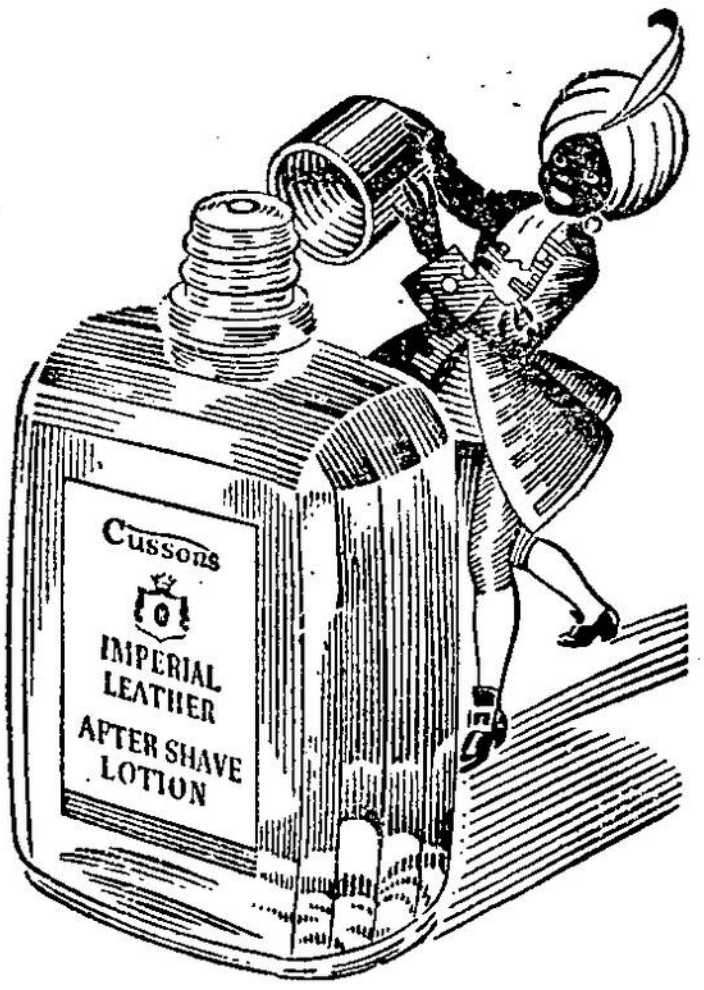

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ARGOSY

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Plum Blossom Country

THIS is the time of year I love the most,
When with new eloquence the blackbirds sing,
When Winter's but a half-defeated ghost
And on black boughs green buds are opening.

And at this time in England I love best
These vales of Worcestershire, where warm winds blow
Across the rich red earth, and that shy guest,
The Spring, has hung the orchard trees with snow.

DOUGLAS GIBSON

HEAR MY SONG

Naturally the gondolier was certain that something would go dreadfully wrong

by JOHN SALT

ETTORE VINCENZO FALIERI was a gondolier with the voice of an angel; a man who could make a popular song sound like grand opera; the pride of the Palazzo Respighi where he plied his craft for those guests more interested in slow-motion romance than in high-speed transport. His songs were a commercial asset and they had kept him his place when the damp old Venetian palace was taken over as a hotel and casino by an astute American. As long as Ettore sang, he could eat: the two things were interdependent.

By early middle age Ettore's voice had become a complex and wonderful instrument, immensely flexible, able to run the gamut of emotion, by turns martial, soft and caressing, infinitely melodious. There was a trick it had of leaping from a tenor cadence to an incredible note in alto. This he usually reserved for visiting film actresses and the results were always highly rewarding. He took no particular care of his voice; as a rule, the common cold served merely to enhance the beauty of his singing, and so, when disaster came, it found him totally unprepared.

He had picked up a honeymoon couple from the water steps of the Palazzo and poled them out into mid-canal. The night was still and the water calm, the lanterns of the gondola cast a yellow radiance upon the canal mist, which to lovers means romance and to Venetians rheumatism. Having studied his customers with his habitual care, Ettore decided that *La donna è mobile* would meet the case. The words might seem a little inappropriate to a honeymoon, but he knew that the boy and girl spoke no Italian and was quite sure they would like the tune. Also, he had heard it sung in the hotel lounge the previous evening, and was certain he could better the performance.

The moment was magic as he began to sing. Passing gondolas and launches halted for their occupants to listen. Ettore sang without effort, the notes flowed like liquid gold but he planned to husband his strength for that alto note he sometimes threw in gratis for honeymoon couples. He was halfway through the first verse when he realized that something was wrong. His throat

had dried up and it was becoming horribly clear that, far from hitting alto, he could never carry the tenor. He transposed the key, but the effect was bad and the lovers stirred uneasily as they gazed up at him.

Ettore realized that one verse of the changeable lady was all he could possibly manage, and that only by an enormous effort. He deliberately slurred over the notes and raised the pitch, hoping to conclude upon the right note by sheer lung-power. His voice lurched towards the close like a baulky horse at a fence. He made one last gallant and ill-advised attempt. There was a moment when it seemed that he would be successful and then—dreadful discord, utter cacophony, silence.

The lovers drew apart and sat up, making polite evening conversation. A sudden murmur arose from the surrounding craft, which now resumed their journeys. Ettore stood alone in the darkness, his world in ruins. He urged the gondola into rapid motion and brought it back to the Palazzo. The lovers scrambled out and the husband, an Englishman, began to murmur some embarrassed compliments about the song. Ettore tried to reply in a voice that had become shallow and squeaky. He went and sat upon the end of the pier, staring down at the dark water.

Word soon got around concerning Ettore's misfortune and reached the ears of Signor Harry, the proprietor. He came out on the pier and walked over to the dejected gondolier.

"You must take care of that cold, Ettore," he said. "We don't want the Palazzo Respighi to lose the finest singing gondolier in Italy." The words were kindly but the tone in which they were spoken left no doubt at all that such a loss, with all its implications, had already been considered.

A wave of panic came over Ettore, and he rushed home to his wife, Alida, and sat up all night inhaling the fumes of a herb kettle and eating boiled onions. Next day he felt no pain in his throat, but his speech was still no more than a whisper and to sing was quite impossible. He did not work that day, nor the next, but sat at home nerving himself to go and see his friend, Guido Cantonare, a doctor whose qualifications were not impressive and whose twin hobbies were alcohol and electronics.

The consulting-room was small and untidy, packed with medical instruments and radio equipment. A modern wire recording machine occupied one corner of the room and was surrounded by a tangle of ancient wireless sets and loud speakers. Cantonare was a small man with bird-like features, and he would have been bald but for the hair that grew from the back of his head and was trained cunningly forward to lie in a stringy fan

over the cranium. He was a man of many words and unlimited alcoholic capacity. At the moment he was just about sober enough to focus his eyes, and he found it simpler to remain silent and look wise while Ettore whispered his tragedy to him.

The tale was soon told and Guido spent a little more time in meditation before rising to make a thorough inspection of his friend. Then he settled himself again in his chair, refilled his glass, and considered the patient.

" Your voice," he said at last, with the air of one enunciating an eternal truth, " is undoubtedly gone."

Ettore conveyed in whispers and with some violence that he had already reached a similar conclusion and was now anxious to know what could be done about it.

The Doctor took a long drink, then shook his head, and said that nothing could be done.

" Nothing at all? "

" Ah, do not mistake me, Ettore. I have no doubt that normal speech will return in time, but you must understand that there has been some sudden and violent deterioration of the vocal cords. To sing again would be impossible, I think. There might be some improvement if you left Venice and got away from these confounded mists. One could not promise. No, my friend, I think that in future you must be content to remain a gondolier without incidental music."

" But, Guido, if my voice is gone, Signor Harry will dismiss me! "

The doctor spread his hands wide and drew up his shoulders until he looked like a benevolent vulture. " What of that? There are others who own gondolas."

" You do not understand. It would not be the same."

" You came for my help as a doctor and I have none to give, therefore you must accept the comfort of a friend. Calm down, Ettore. Have some grappa, and let us talk this over."

They sat far into the night while Ettore whispered to Guido of the Respighi tradition of the singing gondolier and of his own pride in the voice that once could fill the great chasm of the Grand Canal like the crowded auditorium of La Scala. The night wore on and they became very drunk.

It was after midnight when Guido felt the need for music and reached an arm over the back of his chair to fumble with the controls of the recording machine. Ettore half rose to help him, then slumped back in his seat as the exuberant lilt of *Questo e quella* filled the tiny room. The voice of the singer was all too familiar, and, listening, the bibulous gondolier remembered the time some years before when he had sung his whole repertoire to

Guido, and the little doctor had recorded the songs, as he put it, for the benefit of posterity.

Ettore began to cry. " This is unkind, Guido. Turn it off, there's a good fellow. The thought that I shall never sing the Duke's song again gives me pain beyond belief."

Guido rose obediently and silenced the machine, but his eyes were rapt, he seemed absent-minded, far away.

A few moments passed before he spoke again. " Ettore," he said, in a voice that trembled slightly with emotion and grappa, " I am beginning to have a great plan."

" What sort of plan? "

" I am not quite sure yet but in any case we have drunk too much grappa to discuss it tonight. Go home, Ettore, and let me think. It may all be foolishness, and yet . . . and yet, my friend, I think you may sing again."

Falieri rose unsteadily to his feet, a tragic figure. " You send me out into the night," he said sternly. " I go."

" Mind the step," warned Guido as he guided the tottering gondolier. " By the way, Ettore, do you have false teeth? Ah yes, of course you do! I remember having you fitted with the plate myself. Farewell, old friend. Sleep well and come to see me tomorrow."

Ettore called next day and found the little Doctor in a mood of mysterious enthusiasm. He prevailed upon the gondolier to leave his dental plate and sent him home to live on soup and grief for a further three days.

Falieri's mood was Wagnerian when he returned at length to find the Doctor still surrounded by wires, valves, and electrical appliances. " What now? " he croaked.

" Your voice," replied the Doctor gaily and handed Ettore back his dental plate.

The gondolier glared at it. " What foolishness is this? "

Guido sighed. " Be seated, my friend, and I shall make all clear. First, you will remember that I have recorded all your songs so that your voice is still with us, although you can no longer sing. Is that not so? "

" Yes, of course. What then do you suggest—that I should carry a gramophone in my gondola? "

" Not quite, my simple friend, but something similar. Observe your teeth, for example. You see nothing different, perhaps, and yet, when you put them in your mouth you will become the first human radio station and transmitter. Go on, put them in now."

Ettore complied and the dental plate seemed to tingle as he placed it in position.

" Now, make as if to sing."

" I cannot sing—"

" Open your mouth, Ettore, and you shall hear."

Ettore gaped, and immediately a great flood of melody poured forth which made passers-by stop to listen and say: " Surely that is the voice of Falieri! Cantonare has wrought a great cure." For by now the tale of Ettore's affliction was all over Venice.

Falieri himself was overcome. He gagged upon the magic teeth and they flew from his mouth, to be caught by the doctor as the music came to an abrupt close.

" Guido, what have you done? "

" I have performed a delicate operation with consummate skill. Observe these teeth closely—each houses a tiny valve. The dental plate is now a two-way radio set operating on the principle of the walkie-talkie. By a simple manipulation of the tongue you are in touch with me and the collection of recordings, by a second manipulation you can transmit the song which I shall place upon this machine—" Here Guido indicated the tape recorder. " Your own magnificent throat will provide the necessary resonance. The technique will require careful practice, but, after all, who can doubt that you are actually singing when the sound comes from your own mouth? "

" Can this be done, truly? "

" You yourself have just proved it."

" And you would do this for me! I am beyond words, Guido."

The friends embraced, and Ettore, once more a singing gondolier, shed tears of mingled joy and relief.

The technique required careful practice, as Cantonare had foretold, but Ettore quickly gained confidence and hurried off to the Palazzo leaving Guido to calculate what percentage of the gondolier's nightly takings he might reasonably claim for operating the relay service. Signor Harry's welcome was not effusive at first, but Ettore took his gondola to a position in mid-canal and began a serenade that brought all Venice to listen and delight.

It was like a new toy to Guido and he played the whole of Ettore's repertoire in a performance lasting from nine in the evening until two in the morning. Ettore thought it well for the world to know that he could sing again, but the marathon was not repeated.

There were times, of course, when the Doctor was on his rounds and on those occasions there could be no songs. This, if anything, heightened Ettore's popularity since his patrons came to recognize that a singer like the gondolier could not be expected to perform at the drop of a hat. They put down his periodic

silences to artistic temperament and were prepared to pay higher rates for his services when available.

The broadcast routine became simple with practice. The gondolier would first inspect his passengers and decide on a song. Then he would click his tongue and murmur conversationally, for example, " I think I shall sing a barcarole." A few seconds would elapse (the timing was perfect), then Ettore would open his mouth, and delight would follow.

Time passed and the friends prospered, but Ettore was not altogether happy. He remained eternally grateful to the doctor but their relationship was not without its strains. Ettore tried to think of the doctor as a mere mechanic who provided the necessary link between his vocal cords and the store of melody, but Guido would not have it so. He began to refer to " my songs " and so far forgot himself on one occasion as to disagree quite audibly with Ettore's choice of a ballad, and the gondolier was hard pressed to conceal from his passengers the conversation going on inside his mouth.

Cantonare, in fact, was coming to regard himself much more in the guise of a benevolent guardian than a slave of the radio waves. This in itself would not have been so bad if Ettore could have trusted the guardian, but then arose the worry over Guido's addiction to grappa. There was really no telling what the Doctor might not do when sufficiently lubricated.

The first trouble, slight as it was, turned out to be more Ettore's fault than Guido's. The gondolier had always been in the habit of leaving his dentures in sterilized water overnight, but, for obvious reasons, this could no longer be done, and he took to keeping them in a little leather pouch beneath his pillow. Returning late one night to find Alida already sleeping, he crept into bed beside her and forgot to remove his teeth.

He was awakened an hour later by his own voice singing the drinking song from *Traviata*. Half awake, he snatched the teeth from his mouth and thrust them beneath the pillow just as a clothes-brush struck him smartly on the head. It was wielded by Alida. " Ettore! " she screamed. " You are my husband and I love you as a wife should. Your children also love you. We all know you sing like an angel and we like that fine, too. But, please, Ettore, not at three o'clock in the morning. Listen to what you have done."

Falieri sat up and listened. It was dreadful: the children were screaming, half the dogs in Venice were howling, the neighbours' windows were going up, and the first brickbats were beginning to arrive. And over and through it all those accursed teeth continued to sing *Traviata* beneath the pillow.

He tried to stop Alida as she snatched away the bed-clothes, but it was too late and *Traviata* immediately regained full volume. Alida screamed once and sank fainting to the floor. Ettore was only just able to contact Guido and stop the song before the police arrived to investigate.

Of course, Ettore had to tell his wife the whole story, but she had no mind for anything mechanical and at once regarded the teeth as works of the devil. She would never come near him while he wore them and Ettore had to remove his teeth and hide them away before entering the house, just as some men have to take off their boots before walking into the kitchen.

Next day, while Alida went to pray for her husband, Ettore called on Guido to give him a piece of his mind. The Doctor admitted that he had been drunk, but stated that he had received a signal to play *Traviata*. Ettore must have moved his tongue and given the order in his sleep.

The accident made him more cautious but he became even more certain that one day something would go dreadfully wrong. He was not mistaken.

Signor Harry had made a success of the Palazzo and he determined to give a great party to celebrate his decade as owner. Everybody who was anybody at all was to be there, and Ettore was to sing. This was very awkward, and Falieri had a long talk to Guido about it.

" One can get away with the occasional slip out on the water," he explained, " but tonight will be different. I shall be under bright lights in the ballroom, with hundreds of people watching my every movement. We must get this right, Guido! There will be request songs, of course, and I shall have to repeat the titles to you in each case. It will all sound most odd."

Guido, whose hair had slid from his head and now hung down his back, giving him the air of a superannuated Red Indian, nodded gravely and said: " Have no fear, Ettore. There will be no slips, your voice is in safe hands."

Then he hiccuped and went down on all fours to hunt a bottle-opener.

Ettore began to wonder with increasing desperation whether there was no way of avoiding the night's ordeal, but time was short and he hurried off to the Palazzo.

Signor Harry, who was not remarkable for his popularity in Venice, had dragooned, cajoled, and coerced an immense gathering at the Palazzo—his guests needed no further driving once it was learnt that Falieri was to sing. With this treat in prospect,

the party went well until midnight, when all were waiting for the final stroke of twelve that should herald the performance of the gondolier.

The proprietor led Ettore to the exact centre of the mirror-polished ballroom floor and raised a fat hand to still the acclamation of the company.

"Friends, I give you Ettore," he cried.

The gondolier surveyed the wolves and shuddered.

"There are those," continued Signor Harry, "who say that Ettore's songs are old, that for two years he has sung nothing new. What of that?" Signor Harry's voice became reverent. "What of that, I repeat. Surely the best things in life are the old things. Old wine, old friends, old songs."

He appeared to brush away a tear just as a voice, heard comfortably by most of the audience, remarked sarcastically: "Old tin belly."

Signor Harry glanced swiftly at the gondolier who seemed not to have spoken at all.

A wave of applause, either for the singer or the comment, drowned further speculation, and under cover of the din Ettore mumbled, "Sober up, for the love of heaven!" to Guido. Signor Harry caught the words as he moved away, and glared incredulously at the gondolier.

Things went from bad to worse. The first request was for the drinking song from *Traviata* and the audience was pleasantly titillated by a disembodied and distinctly bibulous voice that remarked: "The wife didn't like this one in bed, eh, Ettore?"

Then somebody asked for a song which had not been recorded and Ettore made great play with a handkerchief to drown the response: "You know damn well we don't have that one."

Ettore was perspiring furiously and, to make matters worse, Guido had begun to hiccup. Even then all might have been well, for the audience, although mystified by the interpolations, were prepared to forgive all when Ettore sang. His final encore brought forth a frenzied ovation, and Ettore thankfully broke the wireless contact with his tongue the moment he had finished singing.

But Guido's hiccups seemed to have disturbed the delicate switch mechanism, and he had the uneasy feeling that the Doctor remained, as it were, on the line.

Signor Harry was looking thoughtful and he expressed a desire to see Falieri in his office after he had presented him to the more distinguished guests present. The last of these was the immensely regal Dowager Countess Fontes de Oca, an elderly lady of

irreproachable pedigree and Royalist sympathies. Falieri bent to kiss her hand, and at that very moment Guido gave a tremendous belch.

The clink of glass upon glass was clearly audible, then Guido said, " I'll give you a toast. Up the Révolution! Down with all reactionary hyenas and their bedizened hags. If I can find the *Internationale* among this lot I'll get my friend to sing it right away."

The words rang out in the sudden frozen silence of the room and the effect upon Signor Harry's guests was electric. They gazed for one second at the man whom they had so lately honoured, the man who now preached red revolution, and made towards him in a body.

The rest was nightmare.

Ettore fended them off, left and right, and darted from the salon singing *La donna è mobile* at the top of his voice and with his mouth tightly closed. A guest just failed to catch him at the door and Ettore plunged into his gondola, pushing wildly off into midstream and temporary safety.

It took him half an hour to reach the Doctor's house, singing madly all the way.

Once there, he put his shoulder to the door and burst in to find Guido spread out on his couch, far gone in grappa, and with the wire machine grinding inexorably away.

He crossed the room in one stride and demolished the infernal machine with a blow of his fist. He tore the teeth from his mouth and jumped on them. They lay in glittering fragments upon the floor.

Then he turned upon Guido, who, lost in alcohol and revolutionary ardour, surveyed his friend without alarm. Ettore picked up the shattered wire machine and telescoped it over the Doctor's head.

" There, take my voice," he shouted. " Take it and keep it and play it to your children long after I am dead."

He turned and left the house, all passion spent. Dawn was not far off and a faint glow already lit the sky. Ettore felt much better after the outburst and began to hum the snatch of a song; it sounded vaguely tuneful. Angrily he put a hand to his mouth, but there were no teeth there.

He chuckled and sang a little more. The voice was a little reedy, not too bad. Could it be that he might yet sing again?

Ettore came to his own house and silently climbed the dark stairs. Alida slept quietly in their bed but she stirred and awakened as he undressed and settled himself beside her.

" I have been thinking, Alida," said Ettore. " Gondolas are an out-of-date craft and Venice is an old and rheumatic town. I think we should move to Naples and buy a motor-boat."

" You have lost your teeth, Ettore? "

" I have destroyed them, wife."

" *Ave Maria,*" said Alida Falieri.

★ ★ ★

REWARDS AND FAKIRS

I was serving on the troopship *Orient.* We were lying in Bombay Harbour alongside the disembarkation sheds . . . A Quartermaster came to the Ward Room and said that a fakir was at the bottom of the gangway and asked if he could come on board and perform some of his tricks . . . The Captain thought the troops and crew might like to see this . . . The fakir called for twelve volunteers to assist him. The fakir selected a dozen and lined them up in a row. Then he stood in front of the first one, patted him lightly on the cheek: " Shut eye, big man," he said, " shut eye and go sleep."

He did this to all of them. Then he stood in front and in a Sergeant-Major voice yelled, " Mark time. Mark time." They all obeyed him. " Faster, faster," he commanded, and faster they went. Again he called, " Faster, faster," and I have never seen men lift their feet so quickly. Then he yelled, " Stop." At once they stopped. " Off jackets," he called and the hypnotized men threw off their tunics. " Off pants," was his next order . . . We roared with laughter. " Jump over the side," he next ordered and the men raced to the ship's rail. " The other side," was his prompt command as the men had already got their feet on the port rail. Each man turned and raced to the starboard side. " Back again," the fakir yelled. " Stop! Stand to attention." The men lined up shoulder to shoulder again. He stepped up to the first man. Striking him lightly on the cheek, he said sternly, " Wake up, big man." The fellow woke up, blinked his eyes and then made a run for his clothes. When all were brought back to sensibility the fakir bowed to show that the show was over.

We returned to the Ward Room. The Captain said to the Master-at-Arms, " See this man down the gangway and give him something for his show."

Half an hour later the Master-at-Arms came into the Ward Room. " What did you give that fakir for his show? " I asked . . .

" Give 'im, sir," said he. " Give 'im. Why, sir, I give 'im a damn good hiding for mucking ab'art with the British Army."

COMMANDER A. B. CAMPBELL, R.D.,
When I Was in Patagonia

SECRET TABOO

In the black fantastic forest danger waited

by EDWARD LINDALL

THE air inside the small, army-type tent was thin with altitude and thick with cloud mist and grey wood smoke. Talbot was long used to the smoke, but it made him squint slightly as he watched the girl sitting at the other side of the crude tree-branch table. Her sudden appearance late that afternoon had painfully complicated his chance of escape, and he told himself he should be hating her. But there was something about her, something apart from the way she looked now in the soft lantern light, that made hatred impossible. All he could do was worry about her secretly and be sorry for her because she was inextricably committed to his own danger.

"If you know where the birds are it won't hurt to tell me," she said.

"You're asking a lot," Talbot growled.

"Just two birds would be enough," Jan Lincoln said. "That's all."

Her voice was low-pitched and quiet. An American accent gave her words a clear edge they would not otherwise have possessed and, to Talbot's New-Guinea-trained ear, an underlying touch of humour. She was a tall girl, slender but strong, with an oval face and a firm chin. Her nose was short and straight, her eyes grey. She gave the impression of self-sufficiency without being aggressive about it.

"Of course," she said, "you could be stalling because you really don't know."

Talbot didn't answer.

"Or because it's a cover for something else."

A gleam showed for a moment in Talbot's blue eyes. "For instance?"

"Anything." She pushed a lock of dark hair back from her forehead. The gesture was slightly nervous, but her eyes were steady. "One of New Guinea's charms is the variety of its law-breaking."

Talbot shrugged the draped blanket closer round his shoulders, as though the cold mountain air had suddenly grown more chill.

He threw wood on the fire that smoked sullenly in the hollowed tree trunk at the end of the tent. The wood was damp and sappy and it burned badly, but in the small tent it created enough warmth to make its smoke worth while. Warmth was a luxury in the Mossy Forest, 12,000 feet up in the Kolurons, part of that great central backbone range that divided New Guinea into north and south.

Then, slowly, Talbot's rather stern face relaxed. Small laughter wrinkles appeared round his eyes and he looked younger than his thirty years. He grinned, a strangely boyish grin that contradicted the hard, whipcord look of his body, the calm, experienced seriousness of his manner.

"The fact that you came here alone, seeking me out, proves you don't believe I'm breaking any laws."

"Not necessarily," she said, calmly. "It could just prove that I back my hunches."

"Four days' walk into the mountains, alone but for three carrier boys, and now you try to pretend there's something sinister."

"You just don't know scientists," she said. "We're a determined race."

"That's true," Talbot admitted, wryly.

"Well, have you got any birds, or haven't you?"

The straight question dislodged Talbot's grin, and his face looked older again. His mouth was set and the line of his jaw jutted out. "Give me time," he said curtly. "I thought scientists were supposed to be patient, too."

He spoke curtly because he had felt himself responding to her frankness, her easy friendliness, and the slight taste of that pleasantness sharpened the anxiety for her that was corroding him like some strong acid. Outside the cramped and smoke-hazed little tent, in the blackness of the fantastic forest, he knew death was waiting for them both and he could think of no way of evading it.

It wouldn't come now, during the night, because the darkness was peopled with evil spirits. But at first light, at the first greyness that pearled the cloud mists among the distorted, moss-covered trees, the Kokos would close in. There was no vegetation there to hide them, only the bulbous trees, but neither he nor Jan Lincoln would see a sign of them . . . the evil-stinking little men with their bark loin-cloths, their nose-rings and their wet, pig-like eyes, their filed and betel-stained teeth, the dyed fringes of human hair at their waists. All they would know about them would be the sharp, pricking pain of an arrow, the screwing bite of poison, and then, mercifully, nothing . . .

"Can you hear me?" Jan Lincoln asked. She smiled as Talbot's head snapped up. "If you find this graveyard of birds my people will pay well."

"It doesn't alter anything."

"You're a strange man," she said, watching him closely. "You pretend to be tough, but you're a dreadful actor."

"I'm an engineer. I don't want to be an actor."

"You're up to something," she said. "Something more than this birds' graveyard business."

"Such as?"

"Gold . . . oil, perhaps . . . It could be a lot of things."

Talbot got out tobacco and cigarette-papers, started to roll a cigarette, watching the deft movements of his big fingers with fixed attention. "Did someone tell you all that?"

"It's my own theory." She took out a pack of American cigarettes. "Have one. It's easier."

"No, thanks," Talbot said. A grin twitched his lips. "I'm a strong nationalist. I'll smoke Australian."

They lighted their cigarettes and somehow the act of touching them to one flame started a small warmth of companionship that Talbot tried to fight off.

"I don't believe you, of course," he said, forcing his voice into harshness. "Someone told you all that. Down in Wau."

Jan Lincoln's grey eyes widened slightly at his change of tone. Her lips tightened. "Well?"

"Who was it?"

"District Officer Smith."

"A fox," Talbot said, rubbing the back of his head, ruefully. "I should've guessed Smith wouldn't believe me."

"He believed you with reservations," Jan said. "Or I wouldn't be here."

"The graveyard of birds of paradise," Talbot ruminated. "It's a good theory—good as the graveyard of elephants was to Africa."

"The elephant legend's disproved," she said. "But Smith said maybe you were on to something, so I took a chance."

"For some half-dead museum," he said, a sudden bitterness edging his voice, "you chance your life so a crowd of gawky schoolkids back in the States can fill in a rainy afternoon looking at specimens in glass cases."

"Not exactly," she said. "It's a bit more scientific than that."

"Granted," he said. "But it still isn't worth risking your life."

"Maybe you're right," she nodded. "But I'm here and there's no great risk."

"What makes you think that?" His voice was flat.

"Smith told me you knew your way around," she said, smiling. "I was scared when the carrier boys ran away and I thought maybe I wouldn't find you. But now I have, so there's nothing to worry about."

Talbot shifted uneasily on his rough stool. He threw his half-smoked cigarette on the moss carpet on which the tent was pitched, suspended fifteen feet or so above the ground between the trees. This was the forest's floor, a swaying hammock of moss, braced with tree branches and captive vegetation, tough and unyielding. He watched the cigarette-end intently for a moment, as though it could possibly ignite the thick moss. He didn't want Jan Lincoln to see the tightness that was on his face, the look of fear for her that he knew was in his eyes.

"There's something wrong," she said, gently. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Talbot said. "Everything's fine."

"It isn't," she said, and leaned across the table towards him, an immense seriousness on her face. Her eyes were wide open and steady. "I've had the feeling all along there's something wrong. Something really bad."

Talbot looked up then, looked right into her eyes, and he knew he couldn't keep the truth from her any longer. He had meant to, thinking to save her worry, but now he knew he couldn't dissemble. She was the sort of girl who would want to know the truth, the sort who would take it chin up and calm-eyed.

"The Kokos are all around us," he said, simply. "You know what they are."

Her face tightened, held a frozen tension for the length of a caught breath, then relaxed again. "I've heard about them."

"They closed in at dusk," Talbot said.

He wanted badly to put an arm round her and say everything would be all right. But both things were impossible. He couldn't put an arm round her because he knew it would only make him feel worse. And he couldn't say everything would be all right because he knew a commonplace lie would be an insult to her courage.

"You've got a pistol," she said.

Talbot shook his head. "You can't hit what you can't see."

"But you saw them."

"A leg vanishing behind a tree."

"Then maybe you're wrong about being surrounded. You don't *know*."

"I don't need to count heads," Talbot said, gently.

"Couldn't we barter? There's plenty of stuff here—our knives, these plates . . ."

"No," Talbot said. "That's no way out." He paused, took out his tobacco and cigarette-papers, then put them away again untouched. "You see," he said, quietly, "they caught me breaking one of their taboos this morning."

Jan's face whitened a shade. She understood only too well what that meant. She bit her lower lip, holding it between her teeth while she struggled to retain composure. "My carriers must've known the Kokos were about," she said, at last. "That's why they ran."

"They'd only need a hint."

"Perhaps when they reach Wau, the District Officer will come after me."

"Certain to," Talbot agreed. "But don't build on it. Four days in both directions makes eight."

"What time have we got, then?"

"Until morning."

"Not before?"

"They won't attack in the dark."

"Then why are we waiting?" Her words were quick with impatience. "Don't let's just sit here."

"What's the point?" Talbot said. "We can get through them tonight. But they'd catch us in a few hours tomorrow."

"It's better than just waiting here, like animals in a pen."

"Maybe you're right," Talbot said. He stood up, suddenly, the blanket round his shoulders falling to the floor. His head scraped the sloping roof of the tent and, somehow, standing up, he looked heavier. His shoulders were wide and round his lean waist ran a cartridge-belt. A pistol sat snugly on his left hip. "Let's pack some food and move," he said, briskly. "We can use our torches. They won't shoot."

Now there was something to do, some action, he felt immediately better. He smiled faintly as he thought of his amazement that afternoon when he had seen her struggling through the grotesque, moss-covered trees to his tent, her steps springy on the moss carpet, walking like an indifferent performer on the trampoline. He thought also of his anger when he realized she had sought him out and, in doing so, had attenuated his slender chance of getting back to the Wau Valley alive.

Without her he might have stood a chance by breaking through the Koko lines at night and moving fast and non-stop. Not much of a chance; but at least the flicker of one. Now, with Jan Lincoln to hold him back, even that had disappeared. But his anger had long passed. He was even ashamed that it had ever existed . . . Then he saw she was bouncing up and down on the moss, like an acrobat flexing her muscles for a somersault.

She stopped. "What's under this?" She looked at him sharply. There was an expression in her eyes that he hadn't seen before.

"More moss, I suppose," he said. "I'm not sure. Rotting vegetation, too."

"What about air?"

"The air's all right," he said patiently, not even wondering why she was asking the questions. "Knew a chap once whose dog fell through a hole. It wandered about for an hour or so before he went down at the end of a rope."

"And it was all right?"

"Far as I know." His eyes narrowed. "Why the quiz?"

"I'm for giving us a dog's chance," she said, with the ghost of a smile.

"Go on," Talbot said quietly. "Go on."

"Let's escape under the moss," she said. "If they won't fight in the dark, they won't follow us down there."

Talbot felt the first real stirring of hope since he had seen the Kokos ringing the camp. His own plan had been makeshift and without much chance of success; more a physical outlet for the agony of waiting. But now there was something real at last. Something that could work, given a reasonable amount of luck. He forced himself not to let his enthusiasm get too much of a hold. Enthusiasm was as bad as apathy if it was not controlled.

"It'll be pretty mucky down there," he said.

"Not so mucky as the alternative."

"You win." He reached out quickly and gripped her shoulders with both hands.

Their eyes met and held for a moment, then Talbot let his hands fall and they both turned away. Talbot was aware of admiration for her, and something more—something he would not let himself think about, but which he couldn't completely banish from his mind. They packed their kits quickly and shouldered them. Talbot wound a length of rope about his waist, knotted a string to the end of his electric torch and tied it through the buttonhole of his shirt-cuff. Then he picked up a machete and hacked a hole through the moss floor. He tied another piece of rope to a table-leg, hauled on it to test the strength and everything was ready.

"I'll go first," he said. "We can leave the rope. They'll know where we've gone, anyway."

Then he slid through the hole. And looking down, Jan saw him reach the ground and the torch sweep slowly round in close inspection.

" It's not so bad," he called. " Down you come."

Jan started slowly, descending hand over hand, but towards the end she slid and the rope burned her palms. She thudded into the soft, mushy ground, and the tent was nothing but an irregular circle of light above them, strangely substantial now that they were out of it.

" We'll make generally north," Talbot said, lining up a compass.

" Where'll that bring us? "

" Not sure," he said. " I don't know how far the forest extends this way. But the Wau Valley is north."

For two hours they followed the thread of his torchlight through that fantastic other world of tree-roots and trunks that stood on the roots like many-legged pillars supporting the roof of the world. No bushes grew from the slushy, moss-covered ground and no branches put out from the tree-trunks. The trees rushed straight upwards, struggling to find the sunlight, and above the surface of the moss they still shot upwards for a hundred or so feet before the branches started.

And below the moss, Talbot and Jan Lincoln ploughed along in a black-night vacuum, their feet making no noise save a slight squelching as the water retreated and squirted round their ankles. Talbot used the torch freely because he was sure it would not show through the moss and, even if it did in places, the Kokos would not associate it with a human agency. But if their progress was not impeded by vegetation, the foulness of the air and its rarity at that altitude began to slow them down. Talbot felt sweat running down his face and his thick chest heaved widely. His shirt clung to his body like a warm damp towel; but his trousers, wet to the knees, were cold and clammy.

" Can we rest a bit? " Jan Lincoln's voice was low and faint, as though she hardly had the strength to force it out. Talbot stopped and turned the torch on her, ready for what he saw and yet not ready for it. The blank whiteness of her face, and her grey eyes turned dark by contrast, her hair tumbled and wet with sweat, her mouth open, gulping the raddled air.

" Just a little farther," he said, hating himself for saying it, yet knowing it was the right answer. " Another half-hour."

She put her shoulders against a tree-trunk and propped there, gasping, her hands clenched against her thighs. " I'm holding you back," she said. " If it weren't for me . . ."

Talbot moved then quickly, and put a hand on her shoulder. The torch shone on their feet, making a pool of light like a spot-light on the stage of a darkened theatre. " If it weren't for you," he said, " I'd not be doing this. I'd be up there throwing my life away because I wasn't smart enough to think."

She smiled wanly in the reflected light of the torch. " I'm ready," she gasped. " Don't let's stop. Or I'll never get moving again."

So they moved on. But now Talbot walked more slowly, picking his way carefully round the great tree-roots. He began wondering how many thousands of years it could have been since anyone had set foot on this ground. Like most other men who knew the island, he had always taken the Mossy Forest for granted, because you could expect anything in New Guinea.

The moss that blanketed the forest, he knew, had started high up in the trees that for hundreds of years had been wrapped in the cloud mists and rarely saw the sun. Or so a geologist had once told him. Then gradually it spread towards the ground, enfolding the trees until the leaves and branches were wrapped like mummies. But why it had not dropped right to the ground, no one had been able to say. Why it had spread across from trunk to trunk some fifteen feet up was one of those things you had to accept, like hot springs gushing from the snow-covered peaks up on the Dutch border, or the wonderful fertile valleys that nestled in the mountains where everything else was overgrown with jungle.

He glanced at his watch and saw half an hour had passed. But they had been moving slowly and he kept on, forcing himself to do it because he knew, from his own tiredness, the effort of tortured will that must be making Jan Lincoln drag her feet through the ooze. He could hear her laboured breathing and, at intervals, the sudden catch of her breath as she stumbled. But they had to keep on. Some time they would have to climb through the moss to the surface and when that time came they had to be well clear of the Kokos.

Then he heard a gasp and a soft thud. He turned quickly, swinging the torch. Jan Lincoln was down on hands and knees.

" Sorry," she gasped. " I can't go on. Not yet awhile."

" You don't have to be sorry," Talbot said. " You beat me to it. That's all."

He swung the pack from his shoulders and placed it against a tree-trunk. Then he put his arms round her waist and half carried, half dragged her and sat her down, propped against the tree. He squatted beside her, an arm round her shoulders, and her head dropped and cushioned itself against him. He felt a curious gentleness and with his free hand brushed the hair back from her face. He switched off the torch to conserve the batteries and the blackness closed round them. It was so intense that it seemed to have substance, something that could be felt pressing against the skin.

They didn't talk for a long time, then Jan lifted her head from Talbot's shoulder.

" You never did tell me what taboo you broke," she said. " It must've been important to have caused all this."

" It's the craziest thing you ever heard of," Talbot said.

" This whole country's crazy."

Talbot grinned in her direction. " Well, this is how it was. For years, while I was down in Wau, I'd heard about a sacred healing spring the Kokos had. No one had ever seen it, but everyone reckoned it was there right enough." He settled his shoulders more comfortably against the tree. " Then I read in a newspaper how some of the healing spas in Europe had turned out to be radio-active."

" So? "

" So I reckoned there might be uranium near the Kokos' spring."

" And the bird-of-paradise-graveyard? "

Talbot laughed. " To put Smith off the scent. He'd never give me a permit to go into Koko country. The authorities leave them well alone. But I thought if I could get into the Mossy Forest I could sneak over to the spring all right."

" Talk about me taking risks! "

" I had bad luck," he said. " The Kokos should've been miles away eating out one of their gardens. I thought I had them taped. When, smack bang, this morning they were all about the place and me waving a Geiger over their sacred water."

Her face was a pale blur as she turned her head towards him.

" It was salt," Talbot said, disgustedly.

Jan laughed then, almost gaily. " It doesn't sound so sacred."

" Sacred enough," Talbot said. " You see, living up here in the mountains, all they know is fresh rain-water."

She started to speak, but stopped, as though wanting to think again. Then she said, " Will Smith be angry? "

" He'll throw me off the island so fast I won't even bounce."

" But he's only a District Officer."

" Only? Isn't it enough? "

" No," she said, and her voice took on something of her real spirit. " There are courts of law, aren't there? "

Talbot lifted a hand. " Don't even mention them. They'd uphold him and slap on a fine as well."

" That's splendid," she said, ironically. " And I've only just arrived."

" You'll be all right," Talbot said. " I'm the villain."

" One villain," she corrected. " I'm for it, too. He forbade me to leave the valley."

"Well, I'll be darned!" Talbot began to chuckle. "So that's it. I couldn't understand why he let you come up here alone."

"I'm a desperate woman," Jan said. "And I think I can walk some more now."

Talbot stood up, slowly and creakingly, because his body had become chilled. He reached down for her hand and she was so light she came up swiftly. Her feet slipped in the ooze and then she was against his chest and his arms were tight round her. He held her like that for a moment, his face in her hair and his whole body tingling with the excitement of her nearness. Then he put her away, slowly and firmly, like a man imposing on himself a vast discipline.

"It's nearly four," he said, a trifle gruffly, because he didn't trust his voice. "We'll walk until six, and then rest."

So they went on again over the spongy ooze. Their breath jerked again as soon as they made any physical effort and the funnelling beam of the torch made frightening shapes among the boles and the roots. The only mercy was the absence of crawling things, for these were all above their heads, on top of the moss carpet.

Well before the two hours were up Talbot felt tiredness in his limbs like lead and his feet tripped over tree-roots, too tired to lift themselves properly. Behind him, Jan Lincoln went down several times and each time he turned and helped her up she brushed the mud from her hands against her clothes and smiled at him out of a drawn face that seemed all eyes and cheekbones, it was so tired.

Then, near six o'clock, she went down again and this time, when he helped her up, Talbot knew she couldn't go any further. So he sat her down on his pack, leaning against a tree-trunk, and got out some biscuits and a tin of pressed meat. They were hungry, but so tired that they ate without much relish. Talbot unbuckled his canteen and they drank sparingly, not needing to remind each other that they didn't know how long it would be before they emerged.

Talbot thought he must have gone to sleep, because now he saw a shaft of light striking against the ground far ahead. He glanced at his watch. Seven o'clock. He *had* been asleep. Then he became conscious of Jan Lincoln's head on his shoulder and his arm round her waist, holding her firmly on the pack. He shook her gently and she came protestingly awake, lifting her head slowly, then stretching her arms painfully, not with the luxury following easeful sleep.

" I'm ready," she mumbled.

" Look ahead," Talbot said, quietly. " See the light? " He felt her straighten inside the circle of his numbed arm.

" We're safe? "

" Maybe," Talbot said. He helped her to stand, keeping an arm round her while her legs found their strength. " Don't make any noise."

" The Kokos? " Her hand tightened on his arm.

" I don't know. If it's the end of the moss they might be there."

" And then? "

" We'll have to go west or east. Come out somewhere else."

" How *can* they have followed us? " she said. " It was dark when we started. And there are no tracks."

" Noise can make tracks," Talbot said evenly. He stopped and faced her. " Now, don't let this thing get you. They could've fanned out and picked up our noise. Then again, they mightn't. We've got a fifty-fifty chance."

" That's reasonable odds," she said calmly. But there was a slight ripple under the surface.

Talbot laid a hand on her shoulder. " Probably better than that."

" You don't have to lie for me," she said, touching his hand with a quick firm pressure. " But I'm glad you want to."

" I'm sorry about those birds," Talbot said. " I wish they'd been there."

" Maybe they're somewhere else," she said. " Pickled in a radio-active spring."

And when they came to the opening in the moss, it was like looking out from some vast observation platform. The mountains plunged downward into a deep valley almost at their feet and they could see across it to the cruel razor-backed ridges on the other side, down it through streaming cloud wisps to the lush vegetation of its floor and the white thread of a river, and along it for miles to where it hurtled out into the side of the great sprawling Wau Valley that meant home and safety.

It was so grand, so awe-inspiring, that for a moment they forgot about the Kokos. And for Talbot there was something else. He turned his head to look at Jan and marvelled at beauty that could defeat everything the stinking jungle floor had to throw against it. Her clothing was mud-covered, torn in places. Her hair was tumbled and there was mud down one side of her face where she had brushed a hand along it. But with all that she was fresh and wonderful, as though she were slightly dishevelled from a long ramble through some friendly hills in her

native Maine. A summer camper who had lost her way for an hour and spent it picking wildflowers.

Then a slight movement flickered in the corner of his left eye, like a radar blip, flashed to his brain and classified itself . . . range, angle . . . The pistol jumped in his hand, the booming report strangely muted in that depthless verandah. A thin, high-pitched scream pierced the pistol's echo. Something hissed in the air. Swift and evil. A short feather-trimmed arrow quivered stiffly in the ground only a few inches from his foot. He fired twice more into the trees, his mouth tight with anger. Then he pulled back under the overhang of moss, pushing Jan before him with a rigid, sweeping movement of one arm.

" Now what? " she said.

Talbot didn't turn his eyes from the opening. " Now we stick around for awhile," he said, tautly. " See what happens."

" What can happen? "

" Two things," he said. " We do or we don't."

" Make it, you mean? "

He nodded. " That's still fifty-fifty."

" I'm not complaining."

" I know," he said. " I've got a plan of sorts."

" We'll go back and come out somewhere else? "

" No. We're luckier than that. There's a track up to the right, where the Kokos are." He settled back on one knee, eyes fixed on the opening, the pistol balanced for instant use. " We can keep these monkeys off till dark. They have to show on that skyline to get at us and I can pick 'em off like clay pigeons. So all we do is wait for night, jump on that track, and hope like blazes it leads into the valley and doesn't give out."

" You know," Jan said, slowly, " I've got a feeling that's the track I came on. Something about the valley . . ."

" Quiet! " Talbot shot out his left hand in warning. He slid the pistol forward a little, rising slightly from his kneeling position. Two round blobs grew slowly at each end of the moss skyline. Crash . . . a spurt of orange flame from the pistol, the sharp click of the cylinder revolving, then another lance of flame. The blob on the right slowly grew larger and Talbot fired again. The one on the left disappeared. Then the body of a Koko slipped over the moss edge, flopped bonelessly on the ground, and disappeared over the edge. They heard it crash into the trees and undergrowth far below.

" Two for none," Talbot muttered and stuffed another three rounds into the pistol. " That'll keep 'em quiet for a bit."

" Me, too," Jan said, in a small quiet voice. " I can see now it's serious."

Talbot shot her a quick glance, full of admiration for the courage that let her talk like that above her fright.

"I'll sneak up and loose a few rounds into the trees," he said. "Just to discourage them. There's plenty of ammo. I've got another two boxes in my pack."

"No. Don't do that."

Talbot was surprised and thrilled by the anxiety in her voice. Anxiety for him. He didn't know how he was sure of that, but he didn't doubt it for a moment. There was something in the way she had said it, something in the way she put a restraining hand on his arm. He wished he could risk looking at her long enough to read what was in her eyes, but that was impossible. Suddenly he felt very warm and happy. And strangely confident that nothing could hurt either of them now because—well, he had the feeling, and that was all there was to it.

"I shan't expose myself," he said calmly. "Don't worry."

"Of course I'll worry," she said gently. "But do what you think."

He inched forward, crouched low, his eyes scanning the daylight screen and the pistol ready for action. He started wondering about the Kokos, trying to put himself in their place and work out what they would do. It wasn't very encouraging, because all he could think of was rush tactics, with every man spilling down over the moss and overwhelming the white man and woman, with maybe the loss of one or two tribesmen. Maybe without losing any, if one of their poisoned arrows struck home early in the attack . . .

Then the firing started—a quick, sharp spurt of tommy-gun. Then others opened up and in a moment the air was filled with the sound of machine-gun bursts like silk being torn, as though the bullets gripped the air in strong hands and ripped it apart. It was so unexpected that at first he didn't understand. The firing flared up again, harsh and vicious. Talbot felt Jan at his side and took a quick look down into her face. It was white, tight-lipped, and wide-eyed. He threw his left arm round her, gripping her tightly, fiercely.

"So it *was* your track," he said, with grim elation. "We might've made it, anyway."

"I don't understand—"

"Smith," he said. "With tommy-guns it can only be Smith and his police boys. He must've come chasing you and heard my firing."

"Oh dear!" Jan's body sagged inside his arm, all the strength suddenly gone out of it. "Then we're safe."

Talbot turned and put his other arm round her and his face

grew soft. A slight smile tugged at his mouth. "Safe from the Kokos, anyway," he said. The smile deepened. "There's still District Officer Smith."

"You frighten me," Jan murmured.

She leaned back in his arms and smiled up at him, half shyly. Talbot bent and kissed her on the lips, gently, touched with wonder at what he saw in her grey eyes.

"There's a bird-of-paradise graveyard over in Bougainville," he said. "Smith doesn't reach there."

"Good," Jan said gravely. "Let's go find it."

Then they turned and walked towards the opening to face the anger of District Officer Smith. And they were smiling.

An Australian writer contributes this story. In 1943, *after war service in the Middle East, Edward Lindall went to New Guinea—which forms the background of "Secret Taboo"—and served as field officer in the military history section of the army.*

After some years of journalism in London, he is now back in his native Australia. His pseudonym is formed from the names of his daughters, Kendall and Lindsay.

★ ★ ★

LOVE'S WINTER

Winter flowers' webbed patterns lie on stone
or urn, delicate, yet fast as steel;
love's fingers stamp through flesh and bone
beauty's fine-tissued but remorseless seal.

Frost's thin-beat trail is not more delicate
than your brow's line, he scoops no caves
more fragile than the hollows of your eyes,
his lustre's not more silver than your skin.

The sun unclasps frost's stems, but to replace
with blossoms richer earthed, whose colours flood
through leaf and petal, as in your summer face
the gold and crimson of resurgent blood.

Only love's winter stamps his pattern home
where no sun liquefies the dry cracked heart;
his wrinkled scars map beauty's story out
upon the fabric of the human mind.

GILBERT PHELPS

FIREMAN'S WIFE

Why did someone unseen seem to be watching and listening?

by NEIL BELL

JOHN RORKE was a fireman in the *SS. Mary Ellen*, a four-hundred-ton coaster trading between Hull and Hamburg, carrying coal and coming back with any cargo she could pick up. Had he been in the Royal Navy instead of the Merchant, he would have called himself a stoker and not a fireman. There were other differences, too, for he worked harder and longer watches than he would have done under the White Ensign.

There were three other firemen in the *Mary Ellen*: Tom Sibley, Fred Speaght, and Ginger Dawson. Tom was his especial crony, and when they were at home lodged with him and his wife, Edna. John was thirty, a big, powerful, black-haired fellow, not much given to talking. Tom Sibley was rather small, fresh-faced, and brown-haired. He liked to exercise his tongue, was something of a wit, and laughter was never long absent when he was about. He was twenty-four, which was also Edna's age. She was about Tom's height, which was not small for a woman.

The three of them hit it off admirably together and were a very happy little family, the happier, perhaps, because there were no children and so Edna could go out with her husband and Tom of an evening whenever she felt inclined. She often did feel inclined, and between voyages there were few evenings she was not out with them at the pictures, or shopping, or in The Jolly Butcher for a game of darts and a pint.

They were usually several days unloading at Hamburg, often a week, and during those times John and Tom always spent their evenings in the St. Pauli district of the city, and since, as every seaman knows, Port Said is a Sunday school in comparison with St. Pauli, their recreations were scarcely as innocent as those they enjoyed at home. But as Edna knew nothing of St. Pauli and its reputation and neither of them enlightened her, she did not worry unduly when they were away, knowing that the *Mary Ellen* was a stout little ship, well able to take care of herself in anything the North Sea could produce out of the weather locker.

One bitter, blustering March night, the *Mary Ellen* was ten hours from Hull outward bound. Fred Speaght and Ginger

Dawson were sound asleep in their bunks in the foc'sle. John and Tom were alone in the stokehold, Tom raking the coal down from the bunkers and John shovelling it into the furnace. This was their routine more often than not, for the furnace door was five feet up, which was all right for a big strong chap but pretty tough for a small man. Not that Tom shirked what was to him far the harder job; and although John told him not to fuss, and that anyway he preferred stoking the fires, he insisted on doing what he called a bit of his whack and sometimes stoked himself to a standstill and had to have a spell.

The watch was about half through when the door of the bulkhead between the engine room and the stokehold was pushed open and the red, round, freckled face of the engineer thrust itself round the edge.

"All alone, Jack?" he said. "Where's Tom?"

"Slipped up on deck for a breather."

"Gosh, and he's welcome to it. Not my idea of a health resort up there. She's burying her old snout in it and taking half the North Sea aboard every time she plunges. You're lucky to be down here."

"I've seen places I like better," John grinned.

"The old Red Anchor, eh! I'd give something to be there now."

"We'll be there Friday."

"Well, we might. We're not making more'n ten. Not bad. She'll punch through. Everything O.K.?"

"O.K."

"How long's Tom been gone?"

"'Bout ten minutes. Bit more, perhaps. Be back any minute now. Want him?"

"No. Just looked in. Well, let her have it." And the bulkhead door clanged to.

But Tom was not back in a minute, nor in many minutes. He did not, in fact, come back at all, but by the time anxiety was felt and a search made, a vain search, there was nothing that could be done about it, and the *Mary Ellen* plunged on while Captain Arthur Peek wrote in the log that Fireman Tom Sibley had been washed overboard in the middle watch a.m. on March the 18th, 1925. And as he wrote slowly in his schoolboy hand he muttered: "Huh! the gravy-eyed watch." And when he put down his pen he shook his head and then poured himself out a stiff whisky. Having drunk this off, he poured himself out another, even stiffer, to mark the solemnity of the occasion.

There was nothing in the newspapers about so trifling a matter

as the loss of a fireman from a coaster, and so it was from John's lips that Edna first heard the news; and because of John's characteristically blunt way of doing things, it came upon her with the effect of a sudden, brutal blow.

"Where's Tom?" she said, after John had kissed her and flung his cap on the sofa.

"Tom's not coming back," he said. And as she cried out, her face gone white, "Why, what do you mean?" he told her, and saw her face contort and her hand go up to her mouth before she turned away.

Presently he said: "It's finished me, Edna. I'm packing up the sea before it packs me up. I'm getting a job ashore."

She had to fight to steady her voice before speaking, and then she said: "But can you, John?"

He nodded. "It's all cut and dried. I called in at Maitland's Foundry on my way up from the quay and saw Ted Wilding. He's foreman in the annealing shop. I start on Monday."

"But you don't know anything about the work, John."

"Don't have to. It's muscle they want, and I've plenty of that. And guts. It takes guts to work in the shop. I know that. And the money's the best in Yorkshire for unskilled labour: three pounds a week and plenty of overtime. We'll be quids in. You'll be able to have your new carpet on the stairs." He smiled faintly: "And a Joanna one o' these days."

The weeks went by. There was plenty of overtime at Maitland's and John often made his five pounds a week. But it left no time for pleasure: just eating, working, and sleeping. There were no evenings out at the pictures, or The Jolly Butcher. Not that Edna seemed to want to go out now. Neither of them spoke of having another lodger. For one thing, they didn't need the money now, and John hadn't another crony like Tom, and wouldn't want a stranger. Certainly Edna did not seem to want anyone else. They didn't use Tom's bedroom. It was left just as it was when Tom lived with them. Edna used to go in now and then to open the window for an hour or so and do a bit of dusting and move the few bits of furniture about and then put them all back just as they had been.

Things weren't the same. There was a shadow in the house. It haunted every room. It was as if someone unseen was watching everything they did, listening to everything they said.

One evening in late autumn John was working until eight in the evening and it was nearly nine before he reached home, for a heavy fog hung over the city and most of the cars and buses had stopped running. He ate with a hearty appetite the huge meal

Edna had cooked for him and then sat down by the fire to smoke a pipe and read the paper. Edna washed up in the scullery and then came and sat down in a chair on the other side of the fireplace and took up some knitting.

Presently she said: "You were talking a lot in your sleep last night."

He put down the paper and looked over to her. "Was I?" he said. "Must've been the pork pie. I thought it sat a bit heavy. What did I say?"

"I couldn't catch all of it. Only a bit. And that didn't make sense. 'Burn the snake,' you said."

"Burn the snake. Doesn't make sense, does it?"

He had put down his pipe and twisted round in his chair. She looked over to him and said: "Why, what's the matter, John? Aren't—aren't you well?"

"I'm all right. Put that knitting down. Do you know what I said?"

"What you said, John? I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you? I'll tell you. I said, 'Burn, you snake.'"

"How do you know what you said?" His manner, his voice frightened her, and she gripped her hands under the jersey she had been knitting.

"I know. Listen. Remember when I went up to Scarborough to see Emily after Harry died, and stayed a week to put things shipshape? I wrote and said I'd be back by the ten-o'clock train Saturday night. Remember?"

She did not say anything but nodded her head, her eyes averted from his face.

"Well, I came by an earlier train and got home at seven. It was dark, and no one saw me come in. Nor go out again. You hadn't made the bed in our room. But Tom's was made. Funny, that, wasn't it? You always made them at the same time. Shut up and listen. You hadn't made Tom's bed neither that day because it didn't need making. It hadn't been slept in. Ours had. And you and Tom had slept in it.

"Hold your tongue. You'd been sleeping together all that week. And he'd had you before then. Shut up, I tell you! I know. I'd thought that was how it was for some time. That was all. But I knew after that. I went out to the Butcher and stopped till they closed and then I came home and you'd been to the pictures with Tom and had got supper and we were all very jolly and happy together, weren't we? And all the time I was watching you and every time you spoke to Tom or looked at him I knew it was true and wondered how I'd been such a bloody fool so long. Shut up. I've nearly finished.

"On Tom's last trip we were doing our watch in the stokehold. It was the middle watch, and about one o'clock in the morning. There was only me and Tom. And I put it to him straight and he owned up. Said he didn't know how many times. And then I hit him and he went down and stopped down. Down and out. I picked him up and I opened the furnace door—"

"No! No! Stop! Stop!" Edna screamed. "Don't! Oh, don't!"

"Shut up. I hove him up and he opened his eyes and saw the furnace and he screamed. He screamed, 'Stop.' Like you did. But I hove him in and slammed the door. That's when I said, 'Burn, you snake.'"

She had got up from her chair and gone over to the far wall, where she stood crouching, her face in her hands.

He watched her in silence for a long moment and then he went on: "I raked out the ashes when my watch was over. All part of the job. There was nothing left of him. Nothing at all. Except this," feeling in his pocket and taking out a small lump of scarred, discoloured metal. "His belt buckle, I reckon. Thought you might like it as a keepsake." He tossed it over to her and it struck her shoulder and fell onto the oilcloth.

She did not move. Horror and terror held her dumb. Several minutes passed before he spoke again. "Come and sit down," he said. She obeyed him, not looking at him, and he went on: "You can't do anything about it, or I wouldn't have told you. Who'd believe you? They'd say you were mad. Now listen. You've had your fun. Both of you. And he's paid for it. You'll have no more. I'll see to that. Except what I give you. Come over here." Again she obeyed him and he drew her roughly onto his knee, and thrusting back her head, pressed his mouth on hers.

Presently he released her and she sat passive on his knee, looking away from him, her breathing quick, her lips trembling. He watched her averted face for some time, and then he said: "Look at me."

She looked into his eyes and was appalled. He pushed her from him. "Get to bed," he said. "I'll be up as soon as I've finished my pipe."

★ ★ ★

PARSIMONIOUSLY

I bought two dozen kinds of seeds
Including two of parsley,
And everything (except the weeds)
Has somehow come up sparsely.

ROD MACLEAN

BRIGHT LIGHTS

A city such as vision
Builds from the purple crags and silver towers

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY,
Ode to Liberty

Fill the piazza with blue water
And gaze across domestic seas
From church to church. The tide is tame,
The streets look firm with floating marble.
Who made the sea ride in the city?
Movement is all a floating. Ride
The idle tide that smooths the steps:
Now statues ride in the blue air,
Light floats across the white façade
And seaweed over the marble stairs.

ANNE RIDLER, *Venetian Scene*

Night in Seville

In order the better to appreciate the marvellous spectacle of the Feria it was a good plan to go away from it for half an hour, and so, upon one of the last nights we went to walk in the Barrio de Santa Cruz, a whitewashed labyrinth of narrow alleys lying in a sempiternal moonlight of its own, with doorways, hidden patios, iron well-heads, and some of the oldest palaces of Seville. At one end of this there is a garden, touching upon the lovely gardens of the Alcázar, and like those breathing of the orange blossom, and here—it was between one and two o'clock in the morning, in that moonlight begotten of so many whitewashed walls—we heard the sound of voices, and in the tiled space around a fountain found a group of young men and two young women; one unslung his guitar, the others clapped hands rhythmically, there was the crackle of castanets, and the younger of the two girls began to dance the *seguidilla*.

This done, they talked excitedly, and she danced again, another form of *seguidilla* with ballet steps, to no tune, only the clapping of hands and the strumming of the guitar. Once again, and yet once more, she danced; a cool air moved among the overhanging branches; the loveliness of this ancient city, the soft and balmy breath of the orange blossom—something I had not known for so many years since the jasmine-laden airs of the Tunisian gardens; airs so pungent and redolent of jasmine that

they amounted, almost, to a jasmine civilization, made this scented early hour of the morning, this music, and this dancing into an unbelievably beautiful experience; and all the time, not far away, the night sky was lit with the Feria, and you could hear a continuous, distant roaring, now and then individual voices or strains of music, and the crackling fire and rattle of, perhaps, ten thousand pairs of castanets. It produced an excitement and a beauty that were indescribable.

SACHEVERELL SITWELL, *Spain*

Triple Crown

Towery city and branchy between towers;
Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked, river-rounded;
The dapple-eared lily below thee; that country and town did
Once encounter in, here coped and poised powers;

Thou hast a base and brickish skirt there, sours
That neighbour-nature thy grey beauty is grounded
Best in; graceless growth, thou hast confounded
Rural rural keeping—folk, flocks and flowers . . .

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, *Duns Scotus's Oxford*

Tramp's Eye View

Through the ancient poets we have learned that the cities are feminine. So they were to poet Raggles; and his mind carried a concrete and clear conception of the figure that symbolized and typified each one that he had wooed. Chicago seemed to sweep down upon him with a breezy suggestion of Mrs. Partington, plumes and patchouli, and to disturb his rest with a soaring and beautiful song of future promise. But Raggles would awake to a sense of shivering cold and a haunting impression of ideals lost in a depressing aura of potato salad and fish.

Pittsburg impressed him as the play of *Othello* performed in the Russian language in a railroad station by Dockstader's minstrels. A royal and generous lady, this Pittsburg, though—homely, hearty, with flushed face, washing the dishes in a silk dress and white kid slippers, and bidding Raggles sit before the roaring fireplace and drink champagne with his pigs' feet and fried potatoes. New Orleans had simply gazed down upon him from a balcony. He could see her pensive, starry eyes and catch the flutter of her fan, and that was all.

O. HENRY, *The Making of a New Yorker*

La Ville Lumière

These days, the bright days and white days,
These nights of blue between the days,
These streets a-glimmer in the haze:
These are for you, but you come not these ways;
Paris is empty in the light days . . .

These songs, the glad songs and sad songs,
This amber wine between the songs,
This scented laughter from dim throngs:
These are for you, Paris to you belongs:
Paris is mournful with her mad songs.

GERALD CUMBERLAND, *Set Down In Malice*

Edinburgh Lights

. . . from all round you there come up the dull hum of the city, the tramp of countless people marching out of time, the rattle of carriages and the continuous keen jingle of the tramway bells. An hour or so before, the gas was turned on; lamplighters scoured the city; in every house, from kitchen to attic the windows kindled and gleamed forth into the dusk. And so now, although the town lies blue and darkling on her hills, innumerable spots of the bright element shine far and near along the pavements and upon the high façades. Moving lights of the railway pass and repass below the stationary lights upon the bridge. Lights burn in the Jail. Lights burn high up in the tall *lands* and on the Castle turrets, they burn low down in Greenside or along the Park. They run out one beyond the other into the dark country. They walk in a procession down to Leith, and shine singly far along Leith Pier.

Thus, the plan of the city and her suburbs is mapped out upon the ground of blackness, as when a child pricks a drawing full of pinholes and exposes it before a candle; not the darkest night of winter can conceal her high station and fanciful design; every evening in the year she proceeds to illuminate herself in honour of her own beauty; and as if to complete the scheme . . . half way over to Fife, there is an outpost of light upon Inchkeith, and far to seaward, yet another on the May.

And while you are looking, across upon the Castle Hill, the drums and bugles begin to recall the scattered garrison; the air thrills with sound; the bugles sing aloud; and the last rising flourish mounts and melts into the darkness like a star.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, *Edinburgh*

A COUNTRY WALK

Suddenly, from nowhere, it came screeching across the mud at him

by WILLIAM SANSOM

"LIVE in Town?" he used to say to others in the City. "Don't know how you people stand it. Give me the country any day."

And in his pocket, in the little card-case, he liked to think of his name engraved so steadily, so secure: Norman Harris, and FOUR ACRES, and the name of the village, and lastly, deep and green spurning of all suburban Surreys, the rare remote words WEST SUSSEX. It was as good as looking in the mirror.

He had the face of a dog. Early grey hair, thick and stiff and occasionally yellow, he combed back straight from his small square forehead, no parting, and set the stiffer with a gummy cream: he used a wide-toothed comb, and the toothmarks stayed set and deep, exact as the chalk-stripes on his suit, all day. Black eyebrows, pale eyes set close, and all the rest of the face pushed squarely forward, big-jowled but firm and strictly oblong, completed the mask of one of those square-faced dogs by far the greater part of whose faces gruff out beneath the cheekbone-line. His big teeth shone with the clear translucent light of dentures, but they were all his own.

"Got a little place in the country," he would say. But when the street market became lively and he was kept late he was the last to complain: his attitude was one of polite pity to those who tried to condole with him on the long late drive south—Oh no, it was worth it every time. And he would smile broadly and strongly, as if he was full of the good strong air, of beer and cheese and bits of tweed: it was nevertheless a coy smile.

Four Acres was three cottages. Good flint stuff, two thatched and one slated, and whoever had once knocked them into one had set up an old iron verandah, faded garden-blue, along part of one side: this, simply because of its age, seemed in keeping. But Mr. Harris had had the windows out, new steel lattices put in, and a good coating of bright railway-green put on the frames. The paths had been straightened and carefully, crazily paved. Stainless mesh netting was set along the front hedge, and a rock garden put where once hollyhocks had made a ragged jungle.

Not for Harris the whimsy of those who smarten a place with coloured dwarfs and bird-coconuts: it was order, neatness, and strong light modern equipment he liked to introduce—" not only sanitation but sanity," he was fond of saying. Thus there was that rock garden not for prettiness but because it was neat, low-growing, compact. He had most of the older trees down, leaving a few pruned fruit-bearers. His sheds were full of bright new lawn-mowers and newly-devised clippers with springs.

In this way, although he bred no animals and grew few vegetables, and even these through the hands of a local gardener, he nevertheless caught the impression of himself as a " model farmer." He could be one, he felt, if he so wanted: he had the right technological attitude. Five days a week of contrasting himself with the pinstriped companionship of his city brothers bolstered this: two days' acquaintance with his neighbouring rustics did not unseat him.

At Four Acres he dressed in old tweeds, but of gentlemanly cut: he had spent a whole evening battering about a new felt hat in his bedroom, going so far as to soak this in muddy water, to get it properly weathered. He bought a thick knobbled ash-plant, and discarded his golfing brogues for a pair of dubbined boots.

He was not a bad fellow. These little deceptions were backed by a sincere enthusiasm for " the country "—perhaps he was simply going a little too fast, and affectation would drop from him as the soil itself took effect.

His wife was more or less satisfied: the children were packed off to school, she had friends in the near-by county town and a motor-car. " Of course, we have ' the car,' " she used to say, as if she had a not too painful fashionable disease. Moreover, she quite liked gardening.

Her husband was a man of regular habit, he always came home, no trouble of that kind—in fact, it was she who gave the alarm, unnaturally early but as it turned out necessarily, when he did not come back from his walk that stormy summer's day.

They had been moved in two months—it was already high May—and Harris really had to face it: all this time he had never been for a good tramp. Of course, there had been much to do around the house, and they had driven round the narrow roads a little—along the narrow tar, between high hedges, canyon drives of no contact with the fields—and he had strolled in and out the village and round.

But there, rolling out from his end of the village, and his was nearly the end house, lay the great green question-mark—

pastures, dells, copses, streams, all the enormous green mystery compounded of a hundred smaller ones, each hillcrest concealing he knew not what, each path wandering where?

Accordingly, one fine afternoon shortly after five o'clock, he took his ashplant and set out. He felt a pleasant sense of adventure, indeed of purpose. Even a few steps away from the village, as the last cottages fell away and the lane narrowed, and the hedges grew on each side more thickly, there fell upon him a strong illusion of entering uncharted, uninhabited territory. Green leaves high all around, earth rougher underfoot, silence but for his own footfall soft itself on grass and clay—a bird started from a bush and he smiled to catch himself jump. It sounded at least as big as a badger.

How big did a badger sound? It occurred to him that he had no idea. He remembered seeing a badger in a museum somewhere; and feeling awed that an animal of such considerable size—thick as a little hog—should go wild in the peaceful English countryside. Though at night. And anyway, no one had ever heard of a badger at bay. As he walked on he felt distinctly relieved. Animals were so difficult.

Then the lane suddenly widened, dwindled up to a crest—and there was the open country rolling away beneath. And a gate.

Harris paused, glanced at the latching of the gate, then leaned on it instead. He must have been walking slightly uphill, for this was a relatively high point from which much could be surveyed. The sun shone over a wide undulation of patched green and bright brown; fields of all shapes flowed, nestled, sloped, rose, but always exactly fitted together. The bright red of a Dutch barn twinkled in the distance like a dwarf pillar-box.

Trees smeared their dark patches here and there, sometimes clustered together round some secret in a hollow—but up on the opposite hills, where downland began, they made immense and magnificent black shapes, like giant caterpillars stalking across the skyline.

At one point a chalk cliff shone white—a quarry? Lanes or roads could sometimes be discerned by their thin lines of thorn hedge: but often they disappeared as the ground rose and fell. Topography, he thought. Now where are we? For a few minutes he stood and worked out his walk. He decided to skirt the low ground where he knew a small river lay and make for the crescent of downland rising above. He took another look down at the gate-latch. But the alternative path to the right was no good. He smiled at himself, and put his hand to the iron contraption.

For a time he tugged and messed about with rods and slots. He knew he must be careful to close these farmers' gates, but

here were his townsman's hands not able even to open it. It was exasperating. He felt absurdly incompetent. At last he saw that the whole thing had to be lifted free of the ground—and he heaved it up, fearful of never being able to close it, or that some piece of rotting wood might simply break off for ever. But it swung quite easily; and as he replaced it he muttered, "Something attempted, something done," and walked forward with far greater confidence than before.

Two black starlings were sitting on a cow's back. He saw the cow itself first, and had already begun to alter his course, before the position of the birds came home to him. Birds there on its back? He stood for a moment startled. The birds were busy pecking along the length of the cow's red back, the cow munched unconcerned. Harris stared at the birds with positive dislike, his lip curled up as at the sight of an open wound. Then he shrugged. Must be after ticks, he thought: or salt, or taking hair for a nest? Accountable at all events.

But what he really disliked was the unconcern of the cow: he had never got used to the way animals got on together in the country, horses nuzzling at goats, piglets playing with geese, ducks and chickens passing the time of day. And who had once said that hedgehogs take an occasional drink off a sitting cow? Even a cat-and-dog companionship he found vaguely horrible. And now it was blackbirds and cows.

Well . . . there was much to learn. He gave the cow a wide berth—the cow watched him moodily, following him with its eyes all the way, munching like a fat woman watching him cross the length of a long, long restaurant—and came to the opposite hedge. Briar and thorn, no way out. He looked carefully at the size of the thorns: monstrous black teeth, sharp and wicked, oversize, and there was a ditch too.

But . . . right over at the far corner he saw what looked like a gap. A stile? It was a good pace out of his way, but the only chance. He turned along the field, and found at the very end a large patch of mud ending in sog, a muddy drinking-pool. But he had been right, across this lay a break in the hedge and a kind of stile.

That mud was made of hoofmarks, in each hoofmark a separate puddle had formed. He tried, sank to his welts, retreated, and tried again. One boot went right in to the ankle, he brought it out with a difficult squelch. But now the boots were thoroughly muddied it was not really so bad—his first instinct, booted or not, had been against mud. Then he found a kind of hard causeway, jumped the last mud, slipped, regained himself, clutched at a thorn branch and made the stile, panting and bleeding a little at the hand.

He stood in fact on a length of low brick, a yard-long mossy quay, that dribbled. Such a wayward brick erection so far from anything was itself disconcerting. He wondered what it was, and finding no proper answer, turned to the stile. Once, he remembered, he would have vaulted it.

But a true countryman scarcely vaulted, in any case he was too stout, and with some difficulty balanced himself over, caught absurdly astride for a moment in the middle, one foot too high, one too low—but then was free, rescuing his coat-tail from a sharp post at the last moment.

He was off his course, but thankful to see that this next field had something growing—although indeed cabbages like small trees, unnaturally high to his eye—and a well-beaten path along its side. His spirits rising on this substantial path, he felt he would easily find a way round. He took a direction point on three distant trees, gnarled old boles sprouting a fuzz of new branches. What were they?—Poplars?—Ash?—Beech . . . . Birch? He made a mental note to get one of those little books.

At the end of this field another gate—but this time it swung easy and clear. But then the path turned a corner and there he was faced with sudden activity—a farmyard. Or rather, an activity of buildings: for it seemed to be quite deserted, nothing moved, though great stretches of hoofmarked mud, troughs, litters of hay, and the dark eyes of byres and sties and stalls suggested a meeting place of considerable herds. But now—not even a chicken.

The problem was—could one pass through this, which was plainly private property? He hesitated. He saw the small farmhouse itself further on, saw the curtains unmoving and the door shut, and because there seemed to be thus absolutely nobody about, walked casually forward. If he walked slowly enough nobody could accuse him of using the yard as a right-of-way, he was simply strolling and had not realized. In any case he saw as his eyes grew accustomed, that the path did really continue, all these outbuildings and the farm simply lay to one unfenced side of the path.

He continued along, swaggering rather—if he had had a switch he would surely have swished it—and the great consoling smell of dung fattened the air: somehow this heartened him, this was the round odour of life, fatstock, folk . . . but a moment later the stench of mashed swede-stew and a pile of acrid fishy fertilizer made him take a second thought.

He had just drawn level with the farmhouse itself, and was steadily looking away from it, when the dog began to bark. At first two short hairy coughs—exactly like a man disturbed from

sleep behind his paper—but then as obviously the dog grew certain of its trespasser this rose into a long quavering wail, one could hear the dog's head pointed to the sky.

Harris quickened his pace. Then slowed it—it was vital not to show fear, animals smelt it. His ears strained for the clanking of chains. His eyes searched the sides of the farmhouse, fearful to see this snarling ball of hair come hurtling round a corner, teeth bared, furious, certain master of his own ground.

But nothing happened. After all the dog must have been chained up. He quickened his pace again—the dog was making enough noise to wake the countryside, at any moment someone was sure to appear. Yet he passed the house and came opposite a kitchen garden without trouble. He breathed more freely.

What then happened was a piece of pure bad luck. Certainly in the country something or other mildly disconcerting, or exhilarating, is likely to happen: one finds a mole, a dead crow, gipsies, a steam-roller—any number of minor interests to liven the outwardly placid scene. But Harris's lot, for a man like Harris, was indeed hard.

Suddenly, from nowhere, screeching like an angry bird, a small pink pig flew at his ankles. It came at a low run, he had never seen a pig run, like a heavy pink obus it came screeching low across the mud at him and its snout was at his boots before he really knew.

Memories flashed in a second—maddened boars, pigs nuzzling up dead bodies, an awful story somewhere of an ailing hermit, too weak to move, being devoured by his own famished pigs. They had inward-bearing teeth like rats. And now he saw this muscular pink body beneath him had long gristly white hairs, whiskers on pink rat-body.

He gave a great skip—and took to his heels. The pig came squawking its mad bird-sound after him. How could he know that piglets run as nimbly as little dogs? Or that this, the runt of a litter, nuzzletripe as some said, had been raised on the bottle, and indeed on buttered toast in the very bedroom of the farmer's wife, and in its newfound strength thrilled with such affection for anything human that now it was simply squawking with love to cover Harris with kisses from a wet, adoring snout?

It was bad luck that it had somehow got loose: and that perhaps the dog's barking had excited it. In effect, it chased Harris a good hundred yards or more, Harris's dog-like face gritted like a pointer towards the barred gate ahead, his legs kneeing like bounding wheels beneath him. He cleared the gate with an agility unknown for years, and stood breathing heavily as the pig

rammed its snout at the bars, wicked small eyes glinting beneath ears saucy as little hats, pawing the ground with high heels, suddenly switching sideways and butting the gate like a bouncing foal.

Hell—would it burst the gate? But now behind bars it looked its size, much smaller indeed—yet Harris turned and quickly made off in case it found a way through the hedge. He was breathing hard and thoroughly upset. However much one liked to eat pork, being bitten by a pig was nauseous, far worse than feeling the teeth of a dog, even of a horse, even a bull's horn. Perhaps the similarity was too near—long pig? But all the same he could see now how small the thing really was, a baby—and felt foolish.

No doubt now that he was upset. As he walked along this next field he felt there were eyes watching him, and put his hands in his jacket-pockets to give himself a firmer appearance. Once his foot struck a hard rut, and he stumbled and nearly fell. Nerves out of balance, he lost some of his physical balance.

A horse's head appeared over the high hawthorn and stared at him inquisitively: he looked away, the beast was playful, and now followed him slowly thudding along the other side of the hedge. They all seemed to want something, these animals.

And suddenly he thought: Pray God I don't meet a wounded beast. Pray God I don't meet anything limping or in pain, a horse or a cow or a stoat or even a bird. The animal would implore help, he would be utterly powerless to give it, he simply would not know how. Once he had found a wounded thrush in the bushes of his old garden in London: its back had been bitten by a cat, he had chased the cat away and then found himself alone, eye to eye, with this mauled bird. The bird had looked at him blearily through lizard-lidded eyes, and hopped a little further away. What in heaven's name to do . . . ? Bang its head on a tree? A penknife? Take it in and foster it . . . but it was too late. He had peered down, thunderously alone with that little scruff of feather, and seen to his horror that big white worms were already milling among the bloody feathers. The bluebottles had been there before him! He could scarcely bear to remember what finally he had done—he had lifted his boot and stamped on it, squashed it dead. And only through clumsiness, only because he had not known what else to do.

He plunged his useless hands further into his pockets—and an awful vision arose of a sad-eyed spaniel caught in a trap. Then suddenly he saw a dozen cows walking with interest in his direction. He did not know that cows were liable to do this, mistaking him for their boy—and once again had to quicken his pace.

They lumbered across at him, a surprised look in their eyes—perhaps they were in calf, or with newborn, enraged. He quickly checked over their udders, just in case it was even worse.

Again he got to his gate in time, and this time steeled himself, having judged the distance and the cows' pace carefully, to open it slowly and surely. But it was barbed and chained! He had to climb it, the barbed wire ripped a sleeve. He stood cursing. By the hedge he saw a patch of giant docks; they were far too big. He thought: Time I was getting back. And he looked round for his three gnarled trees, his location mark. They had disappeared.

But straight ahead, and curiously near, for he seemed to have gone no great distance—the downland began. Distances were deceptive. He decided to go on, achieve higher ground, and find his trees again.

The thorn hedge changed to a stone wall and he soon found himself on turf. Up here the sky seemed to have grown much bigger—a clearer air blew across the rough ancient stones littered about. The sky's great width could be felt all around, the clouds themselves seemed to hang nearer, a feeling of the immensity of the heavens befell.

Harris took a deep breath. But instead of feeling relief his upset nerves went their shaken way and drew even greater unease from this vast new desolation that lay everywhere around. He glanced over the stones and turf up to where a monstrous ring of black trees gathered on the rim of the hill making a dark mystery of their depth.

He did not like to look at them, he looked away, downward and back. He searched for a long time for his own trees, his landmark, and at last found them in what seemed an utterly changed position. They looked very small and far away. He must have veered round in a half-circle? Yet this could still be no more than a mile or two from his home.

The country lay like a map beneath him. He could see a main arterial road cutting across like a white line, and the winding road home, a long way round. And in between, the lower-lying fields which he could cross as a direct cut. His home village lay hidden behind a kind of escarpment. Then suddenly, as he was gazing over the wide sunlit vista, his nerves quickened, he held his breath, that whole undulation of rising and falling ground had seemed to move, heave itself.

The shadow of a cloud was passing over the map, it came towards him like a fast-moving tide, heaving the hills as it came.

A simple matter? Not so simple. He watched it, he began to judge whether it would envelop him or not. It came at a fast

windblown pace, eating up the fields, blotting out life like the edge of a dangerous sea moving in.

The whole countryside grew suddenly inimical. Every deep acre of this ancient sleeping earth breathed a quiet, purposeful life—and it was against him. Not now the simple material conflict with animals—the grave earth itself and the green things growing in collusion from it took on presence and, never moving, breathed a quiet hatred onto the mineral air.

He tried to shrug the feeling away—but it was too strong: and just then the light seemed to blank out, the cloud had reached him and the earth grew grey and more than ever foreboding.

The turf at his feet lost its sunlight, it looked immensely aged, it had a Saxon tread. Winds had blown across those same stones for a thousand years. And above on the hill the ring of trees looked even blacker. Had they been planted to make a sacred grove? The whole pagan mystery, so far from his apparent world of metalled roads and garages and garden fences—yet always so near, always alive just on the other side of the hedge where the field is alone with itself—that great and awful mystery gripped him with its panic force. The graven stone, blood on the stone, dark rings on the pale green grass, bones of old sacrifice sleeping the old terror out over thousands of years . . .

Harris, not an imaginative man, felt all this, as he would in a dream when unknown instincts rise. And his feet seemed fixed to the spot, he could not run for there was nowhere to run simply because there was too much of it everywhere, it was all-enveloping: just as in a closed cupboard there is no escape, only the stifling dark, here it was all air, giddying, stifling in its very wideness and its spreading everywhere without end.

He was giddy as a man on a ladder—but then that same cloud saved him. For he looked up. And he saw that not one but several clouds were travelling high, they were in fact massing and this imminence of storm and rainfall brought him to his senses, he had the ordinary fear to grip on of being caught in the wet. He looked again to where the road ran, but it was too far—the best chance was what seemed a short cut across fields. There was a wood, too, to shelter in: a simple copse set in a kind of dell.

That storm massed quickly, it blew up mauve in the sky—in such a wide sky its full turbulence was seen to grow, it was not like watching a small expanse of clouds form over rooftops. To the left and right the air was still clear—but away in front, just over where that escarpment hid his village, this great dark purple mass formed, a monster like a giant jelly-fish hanging dangerous teats of vapour in the sky.

The whole earth darkened. What was green became mauve—

only the chalk-pit flashed into white baleful light. But Harris suddenly looked at his watch—this was not only the storm's darkness, it was late and the sun was falling. Beneath the high purple mass the horizon showed a line of brazen light, a yellow floss of dying fire, apocalyptic, like the plain strip of light beneath a purple stained glass window.

He had to hurry. He glanced once back at that ring of trees above him—they lowered darker than ever, black as storm now against a dark sky—and hurried downhill to where the fields began. He marked his way on that other cluster of trees below that might afford shelter.

Was it a valley he now entered? Technically, yes—a river wandered low-lying among its reeds somewhere in those flat miles: better to think of it as a basin, a wide flat circle of meadowland ringed round by the sudden cliffs of the downs. All this lay to the left of the fields by whose roundabout route he had arrived—now he seemed to move more easily, there was indeed a long lane that led exactly in the right direction. Moreover, he was walking downhill.

Then the lane suddenly stopped: fields stretched ahead with marshgrass growing in high green tufts from what looked dangerously watery earth. But there was a kind of raised embankment. He followed this. It led to the little wood.

All this time the sky grew darker, the clouds massed huge above, the dying sun cast shafts from the immense cloud panoply and ringed it with poisonous light—it seemed that up there in the heavens a vast battle was already begun. But not a drop of rain. The air held itself breathless: the whole country lay in the bright gloom of a steel engraving.

Harris hurried along the embankment towards the little wood. As it grew nearer he saw that it was not a little wood at all—but a gathering of ancient ivy-grown trees, some very tall, others of a drooping, stick-branched, watery nature, alders and willows. The embankment entered into them, in an almost human way they seemed to be trying to get a foothold on it. Certainly now the grass to either side was wet and boggy, no cows grazing, probably treacherous underfoot.

A sluice suddenly appeared—moss-grown mouldering wood barred with rotten iron, its two struts upstanding like a derelict instrument of torture. He passed it quickly, not liking to imagine for what secret purpose of mud and water this engine had been erected. Visions of imponderable masses of floodwater slowly seeping, of dangerous messages—The Lowering of the Sluices!—came to mind.

But now also—it was something to do with the very flat meadowland round and the approaching branches, gnarled and twisted, of the first tree—his mind suddenly returned to a picture seen in a story-book years before, perhaps before he could even read. It was a picture that had filled him with terror. It was the picture of an oak tree: but an oak tree that ran on castors, that could be seen racing over the fields at eventide, one moment a dot in the distance, zigzagging nearer at tremendous speed, until its great flying arms came hurtling towards one, clutching all around and far higher than the little cottage, the little boy's eyes . . .

He could not remember what it had ever done, or how the story went; perhaps in the end it had been quite a kindly castor tree but it had struck a chill of terror that had never been forgotten.

Remembering this he even paused for a moment before following the embankment into the wood. He looked uncertainly into the greater, greener gloom arched by the branches: cast his eye once more back at the grey fields, overcast and still, wet and empty—ridiculous, of course, to think of crossing them—and then the first heavy splashes of rain came down, each a few yards apart and thudding the grass, and he ran for it.

Inside the wood, darker still. Now ivy and rotten roots exposed like old bones where the earth had dropped, long strands of briar, and everywhere a thousand young leaves speckling everything like giant green lice: so many little leaves dazzled, and now very slowly they moved, shivering and creeping, and began to rustle, as outside the rain-wind rose.

Yet these were small movements—up above where the full force of the wind struck the high branches a great thrashing and swaying began: and down below the rotted old trunks, some split, some already fallen, began to creak and strain terribly. And indeed dangerously—some had already half fallen and hung inclined like tall ship's booms against the upright masts of their ivy-clad fellows. These trees were immensely tall, their thin trunks branchless until very high above; a forest of ivy-sick masts, creaking and straining below, but in dreadful converse above where the wind swayed their foliage to make giant heads talking together.

Harris knew they were talking about him. Alone with their vegetable enormity, with nothing human near him and his nose filled with the smells everywhere of rotten leaves and mould and green decay, his responsible middle-aged middleman framework of tweeds, mackintosh, tobacco, moustache and all experience ceased to matter at all, it faded and he was in mind naked, a soft

nut of human flesh small and childish and vulnerable . . . and suddenly, for these trees were so mast-like with the weight of leaves beginning very high up, there came to his naked mind some fearful thing he had read about a giant race of palms, on an island in the Indian Ocean, a unique Seychellian growth whose manner of fertilization puzzled botanists, and of whom native superstition rumoured a silent shifting after nightfall, those monster trees moved together in the tropic dark to embrace in giant and terrible vegetable loves.

He hurried on with the baleful whispering ever louder in his ears. Ridiculous, he said—and hurried the faster. At least the path was clear. Or it had been. It was getting too dark properly to see. A wall of rain was falling somewhere outside—no light appeared now between the tree-trunks. Yet it had looked such a little wood.

Then his foot caught in root, and he was down. Or had the root instead moved, caught at his foot? He put a hand out to scramble up and a long arm of thorned briar clutched at his sleeve. He tore it away.

Another fastened on to his trousers. He managed to get himself upright and plunged on. More briars took him, the ground slipped thickly underfoot.

Then he realized what had happened—the root in that brief black instant had turned him off the path, his mind black with struggle had plunged him thoughtlessly on into the thicket, he had lost the path.

He stood still for a moment breathing heavily in the dark. The wind roared above, the rain rustled its wall somewhere away, the smell of mould rose everywhere—nothing, nothing but wet dark all around and no way of telling where that path was.

But no good standing there. Anything might happen. He pushed on. More briar caught at him, he heard his coat tear, as soon as he freed himself other arms caught at him, he was using his weight now, pushing through, yet all the time getting in thicker and thicker. Nor did he know what ground was beneath . . . a sudden ditch, a patch of bog, old rabbit-holes with earth mouldering loose all round them . . . appalling words came to mind—hornbeam . . . creeping osiers . . . sedge . . .

Fear mounted on fear. Not only the vegetable conspiracy, but the acute possibility that the storm might really fell a tree, an immense mast of timber crashing black as the dark down upon him . . . and as he thrashed harder at the briar and the briar clutched him more closely he lost more and more of his balance, sound everywhere giddying his ears, and then the blood pounding

inside them roared up to meet it, all rushing and drumming in him like a man lost in the gigantic thrum of a weir . . .

And visions of the whole dreadful day came back, all things conspiring against him, gates, animals, the stone menace of the downland, that low water-land and its sluices, the storm, this dreadful wood and all the terrible life around—and there flashed back to him things he had never much noticed; a white horse cantering up a field, unsaddled and too free, a classic beast upon some purpose too much its own: the remote and faceless siren song of telephone wires: an old iron wheel half devoured by high nettles: and a pinprick man away in the fields who had paused in what he was doing to follow Harris round with his eyes, even at that distance an intruder.

There in the dark, caught by thorns, he suddenly stopped: and like an animal bared his teeth.

Then snarling with fear, sweating, now beginning to shout, "Help! Help! Help!" he blundered further into the blackness, the cruel strands of thorn caught deeper at him, twisting right round him, in their wild state overgrown so that he was like a man caught in a gigantic rose bush, he could go no further and sinking his weight on them only sank deeper in, until he was hanging there powerless to move . . . and then and not till then did he see straight in front, only a few yards further, a wide stretch of dully gleaming white—the chalk-pit, the precipice . . .

His heart rocked, he raised his eyes up to where the wind howled, raised all his wild dog's face to heaven to mutter a prayer of thanks—"Oh God, Oh God," and fainted right away.

It must by then have been getting on for nine o'clock—about the time his wife began telephoning to neighbours and finally the police.

But he hung there for most of the night.

No proper search could be made. The country can easily swallow a man.

It was only by chance that a mobile police car found him towards dawn. Only by chance—for the motor would have drowned the sound of the exhausted cry he put up as gradually he regained consciousness: but at that point the broad white arterial road descended in a long gradient, and the officer driving had shut off his engine, very slowly coasting.

He was found quite easily only a few yards from the road itself, almost on it.

He was drenched through and badly shocked when they brought him home. He developed rheumatic fever, and it bent him double for the rest of his life.

The house was shut up and they returned to live near London. Fear is quickly forgotten—he still talks with some air of the time he lived in the country, regretting that affairs of business forced him back to the suburbs. They still have " the car," and sometimes drive to the country: but he stays inside, bent with his new disease.

In other days people would have said that darker forces than nowadays we recognize had cast a spell on him that night. What is a spell? Was it so?

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QUESTION TIME

Questioning, as Dr. Johnson remarked, is not the mode of conversation among gentlemen; but as these questions are not our own we risk no indiscretions. Allow one point for identifying the questioner, one point for recognizing the person questioned, one for the author, and one for the source in each case, making a possible total of thirty-two points. The answers are on page 93.

1. *But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?*
2. *Well, if you were a bumble bee and a bull sat on you what would you do?*
3. *. . . Did you ever see*
   Any spot so charmingly airy?
   May we build a nest in your lovely Hat?
4. *Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?*
5. *Do cats eat bats?*
6. *Is it weakness of intellect, birdie, or a rather tough worm in your little inside?*
7. *So she makes . . . all the apple parsties, and does all the cooking, do she?*
8. *Birth be hanged . . . You've got more brains in your little vinger than any baronet's wife in the county. Will you come? Yes or no?*

Brilliant new stories by DAVID WALKER —DORIS LESSING—ALISTAIR MacCRAE— MARC BRANDEL—in next month's ARGOSY

★ SCIENCE FICTION CHOICE

THE WAVERIES

It was a strangely silent crowd bunched around the radio in the bar

by FREDRIC BROWN

THE opening guns of invasion were not at all loud, although they were heard by many people. George Baily was one of the many; I choose George Baily because he was the only one who came within a myriad light-years of guessing what they were.

George Baily was drunk, and in the circumstances one can't blame him. He was listening to radio advertisements of the most verbose and annoying kind. Not because he *wanted* to listen to them but because he'd been told to listen by his boss, J. R. McGee, of the MID network.

George Baily wrote advertising for the radio. The only thing he hated more than advertising was radio. And here, in his own time in the late evening, he was listening to fulsome saccharine drippings on a rival network, at J. R. McGee's suggestion—which George very rightly took for an order.

" Baily, you should be more familiar with what others are doing. Particularly those of our own accounts that use several networks. I'd suggest that—"

One doesn't quarrel with suggestions and keep a $150-a-week job. But one can drink whisky sours while listening. George Baily did.

Also, one could play gin rummy with Maisie Hetterman, a cute little red-headed typist from the studio. One could do no more than that, but Maisie was worth just looking at across a card-table. It was Maisie's flat and Maisie's radio, but George had brought the drinks.

"—Only the best tobaccos," said the radio, " go *dit-dit-dit*—the nation's favourite cigarettes—"

George glanced at the radio. " Marconi," he said.

He meant Morse, naturally, but the whisky sours had muddled him a bit, so he was nearer the mark than most people who heard that *dit-dit-dit*. It *was* Marconi, in a way; in, as it turned out, a very peculiar way.

" Marconi? " asked Maisie.

George Baily, who hated to talk while the radio was on, leaned over and switched it off.

"I mean Morse," he said. "Morse, as in Boy Scouts or the Signal Corps. I used to be a boy scout once."

"You don't look it."

George sighed. "Somebody's going to catch it," he said, "broadcasting code on that wave-length."

"What did it mean?"

"Mean? Oh, you mean what did it mean. Uh . . . S, letter S. *Dit-dit-dit*. SOS is *dit-dit-dit, dah-dah-dah, dit-dit-dit*."

"O is *dah-dah-dah*?"

George grinned. "Say it again, Maisie. I like it. I think 'oo is *dah-dah-dah*, too."

"George! Maybe it's really an SOS message. Turn it back on, please."

He turned it back on. The tobacco ad was still going on. "—Gentlemen of the most . . . *dit-dit-dit*-ing taste prefer the finer taste of Golden Harvest . . . *dit-dit-dit*-arettes. In the new package that keeps them . . . *dit-dit-dit* . . . and ultra-fresh—"

"It's just S-S-S-S," said George. "Like a kettle. Or maybe somebody s-s-stutters. But the Golden Harvest people are going to raise—Say!"

"What, George?"

"Maybe it's deliberate, an advertising stunt. Just a minute till I—"

He reached over and turned the knob of the radio a bit to the right, then a bit to the left, and an incredulous look came over his face. He turned the knob to the extreme right, as far as it would go. There wasn't any station there—not even the hum of a carrier wave.

"*Dit-dit-dit*," said the radio, "*dit-dit-dit*." George turned it to the other end of the dial. "*Dit-dit-dit*," said the radio.

He switched it off and stared at Maisie, without even seeing her, which was hard to do.

"Something wrong, George?"

"I hope so," said George Baily. "I certainly hope so."

He started to reach for another drink, then changed his mind. He had a sudden idea that something big was happening, and wanted to sober up to appreciate it.

He didn't have the faintest idea *how* big it was.

"George, what do you mean?"

"I don't know. But Maisie, let's take a run down to the studio, huh? There ought to be some excitement."

April 5th, 1947; that was the night the waveries came.

It was a gay night, except for radio technicians. New York was at its best and gayest, and its main stem, which is Broadway, running high, wide, and expensive.

George and Maisie tried in vain to get a taxi and took the underground instead. Oh yes, the underground was still running then. It took them to within a block of the MID Network Building.

It was a madhouse. George, grinning, strolled through the lobby with Maisie on his arm, took the lift to the fifth floor, and for no reason at all gave the lift-boy a dollar. He'd never before in his life tipped a lift operator.

The boy grinned. "Better stay away from the big shots, Mr. Baily," he said. "They're ready to bite the head off anybody that looks at 'em cock-eyed."

"Fine," said George. He left the lift and headed straight for the office of J. R. McGee himself. There were strident voices behind the glass door.

"But, George," protested Maisie, "you'll be fired!"

"'When in the course of human events . . .'" said George. "Oh, well, it's worth it. I've got money saved up."

"But what are you going to do, George?"

"Stand back away from that door, honey." Gently, but firmly, he moved her to a safe position.

"But what *are* you—"

"This," said George Baily soberly.

The frantic voices stopped as he opened the glass door a bit. All eyes turned as he stuck his head through the crack of the door.

"*Dit-dit-dit*," he said. "*Dit-dit-dit.*"

He ducked back and to one side just in time to escape the flying glass, as a paper-weight and an ink-well came through the door-pane.

He grabbed Maisie and ran for the stairs. "Now we get a drink," he told her.

The bar across the street from the Network Building was crowded, but it was a strangely silent crowd. Most of them were bunched around the big cabinet radio at one end of the bar.

"*Dit*," said the cabinet radio, "*dit-dah-d'dah-dit-dahditdit-dah . . . d'd'dahditditititdah—*"

Somebody fiddled with the dial. Somebody asked, "What wave-band is that?" and somebody said, "Police." Somebody said, "Try a foreign station," and somebody did. "This ought to be Buenos Aires," somebody said. The radio said, "*Dit-dit-dahditititditdah.*"

George squeezed Maisie's arm. "Lovely," he said. Maybe he meant her and maybe not; it didn't matter at the moment.

Somebody ran his fingers through his hair and yelled, " Shut that thing off."

Somebody did.

Somebody else turned it back on.

George grinned and led the way to a back booth where he'd spotted Pete Mulvaney sitting alone with a bottle in front of him. George seated Maisie and himself opposite Pete Mulvaney.

" Hullo," he said gravely.

" Hullo," said Pete, who was head of the technical research staff of the MID.

" A beautiful night, Mulvaney. Did you see the moon riding high in the fleecy clouds like a golden galleon tossed upon silver-crested white-caps in a stormy—"

" Shut up," said Pete. " I'm thinking."

" Whisky sours," said George to the waiter. He turned back to the brooding man across the table. " Think out loud," he said. " We sit at your feet. But first, how did you escape from the loony-bin? "

" I'm sacked, fired, discharged."

" Let me shake your hand," said George. " And now explain."

" I told them what I thought it was, and they said I was crazy."

" Are you? "

" Yes," said Mulvaney.

" Good," said George. " I don't care what it is, as long as it's nothing trivial. But what the devil *is* it? "

" I don't know. Space, I think. Space is warped."

" Good old space," said George Baily.

" George," said Maisie, " please shut up. I want to hear this."

" Space is also finite. You go far enough in any direction, and you get back where you started."

Pete Mulvaney poured himself another drink. " Like an ant crawling round an apple."

" Make it an orange," said George.

" All right, an orange. Suppose the first radio waves ever sent out have just made the round trip. In forty-six years."

" Forty-six years? But I thought radio waves travelled at the speed of light. In forty-six years they could go only forty-six light-years, and *that* can't be round the universe, because there are galaxies known to be thousands of light-years away, or maybe millions; I don't know. But more than forty-six, Pete."

Pete Mulvaney sighed deeply.

" We," he said, " are in the middle of a super-galaxy that is two million light-years in diameter. That is just one galaxy,

a medium-sized one, they tell us. Yes, it's more than forty-six light-years round the orange."

"But—"

"But listen to that stuff. Can you read code?"

"No, not as fast as that, anyway."

"Well, I can. That's the kind of stuff the air was full of *before* broadcasting. It's the lingo, the abbreviations, the barnyard-to-attic chit-chat of amateurs with keys, with Marconi coherers or Fessenden barreters—and you can listen for a violin solo pretty soon now. And you know what the first gramophone record ever broadcast was? Handel's *Largo* sent out by Fessenden from Brant Rock in 1906. You'll hear his CQ-CQ signal any minute now. Bet you a drink."

"Sure, but what was the *dit-dit-dit* that started all this?"

Mulvaney grinned and then his face went blank. He said, "Marconi, George. What was the first *powerful* signal ever broadcast, and by whom, and when?"

"Marconi? *Dit-dit-dit*? Forty-six years ago?"

"Top of the class. The first transatlantic signal on December 12, 1901. For three hours Marconi's big station at Poldhu with two-hundred-foot masts sent out an intermittent S . . . *dit-dit-dit* . . . while Marconi and two assistants at St. Johns in Newfoundland got a kite-borne aerial four hundred feet in the air and finally got the signal. Across the Atlantic, George, with sparks jumping from the big Leyden jars at Poldhu and 20,000-volt power jumping off the tremendous aerials—"

"Wait a minute, Pete, you're off the mark. If that was in 1901 and the first broadcast about 1906, it'll be five years before the Fessenden stuff gets here, on the same route. Even if there's a forty-six-light-year short cut across space, and even if those signals didn't get so weak en route that we couldn't hear them. It's crazy."

"I told you I was crazy," said Mulvaney. "Those signals should be so infinitesimal that, even with the best set, you couldn't hear them on Earth. Furthermore, they're all over the band on everything from microwave to ten kilocycles, and equally strong on each. Furthermore, we've come five years in two hours, which isn't possible. I told you I was crazy."

"But—"

"Listen," said Pete.

A blurred but unmistakably human voice was coming from the radio, mingling with the cracklings of code. And then music, faint and scratchy and punctuated by *dit-dah*, but, nevertheless, music. Handel's *Largo*.

Only it suddenly climbed in pitch, as though modulating from

key to key, until it became so horribly shrill as to hurt the ear, like an orchestra made up of nothing but piccolos. And kept on going, past the high limit of audibility, until they could hear it no more.

Somebody said, " Shut that thing off." Somebody did, and this time nobody turned the thing back on.

George and Maisie looked at Pete Mulvaney, and Pete Mulvaney looked back at them.

" But it can't be," said Pete Mulvaney. " There must be some other explanation. The more I think of it, now, the more I think I'm wrong."

He was right: he was wrong.

" Preposterous," said Mr. Ogilvie. He took off his glasses, frowned fiercely, and put them on again. He looked through them at several sheets of copy paper in his hand and tossed them contemptuously to the top of his desk. They slid to rest against the triangular name-plate that read: B. R. Ogilvie, *Editor-in-Chief.*

" Preposterous," he said again.

Casey Blair, his star reporter, blew a smoke-ring and poked his index finger through it. " Why? " he asked.

" Because . . . why, it's preposterous! "

Casey Blair said, " It is now three o'clock in the morning. The radio interference has gone on for five hours and has reached the point where not a single current programme is getting through. Every major broadcasting station in the world has gone off the air. The Communications Bureaux of their respective governments requested them to get off to aid their campaigns with the direction-finders. For five hours now—since the first note of interference—they've been working with everything they've got. And what have they got? "

" Preposterous," said the editor.

" Exactly. Greenwich at 11 p.m.—New York time—got a bearing in about the direction of Miami. It shifted northward until at two o'clock the direction was approximately that of Richmond, Virginia. Now, San Francisco at eleven got a bearing in the rough direction of Denver; three hours later it shifted southward towards Tucson. Southern hemisphere: bearings from Cape Town, South Africa, shifted from the approximate direction of Buenos Aires to the direction of Montevideo, to the south-east. New York had trouble with direction-finders; weak indications at eleven were towards Madrid; by two o'clock they could get no bearings at all." He blew another smoke-ring. " Maybe because the loop antennae they use turn only on a horizontal plane."

"Absurd," said Mr. Ogilvie.

Casey said, "I liked 'preposterous' better, Mr. Ogilvie. It's not absurd; I'm scared stiff. Those lines converge approximately on the constellation Leo, if you take them as straight lines instead of curving them round the surface. I did it with a little globe and a star map." He leaned forward and tapped a forefinger on the top page. "Stations directly under that point in the sky get no bearings at all. Stations on, as it were, the perimeter of the Earth get strong bearings in the horizontal plane."

"But the Heaviside layer, Blair—isn't that supposed to stop all radio waves—bounce 'em back, or something?"

"Uh-huh. It does. But maybe it leaks. Maybe some waves got through. It isn't a solid wall."

"But—"

"I know; it's preposterous. But there it is. Only there's an hour before press time and you ought to turn the observatories on it and get it more accurately. Get *them* to extend those bearing lines. I did it by rule of thumb. Further, I didn't have the data for checking planet positions. Leo's on the ecliptic; a planet could be in line between here and Leo. Like Mars, maybe."

Mr. Ogilvie's eyes brightened, then clouded again.

He said, "We'll be the laughing-stock of the world, Blair, if we're wrong."

"And if I'm right?"

Ogilvie picked up the phone and snapped an order that sent every rewrite man into his office for orders.

April 6th headlines of the New York *Morning Messenger*, final (5 a.m.) edition ran: RADIO INTERFERENCE COMES FROM SPACE: ORIGINATES IN LEO, SAY SCIENTISTS—MAY BE ATTEMPT AT COMMUNICATION BY BEINGS OUTSIDE SOLAR SYSTEM—ALL BROADCASTING SUSPENDED.

Radio stocks, having closed the previous day at $10\frac{1}{4}$, opened at $9\frac{3}{4}$ and dropped sharply. By noon they were off four points, when a moderate buying rally brought them back a fraction.

Public action was mixed; people who had no radios rushed out to buy them, and there was a boom market in portable receivers. Those who had radios listened as long as their curiosity enabled them to stand it, and then turned them off. Extra-terrestrial or not, the programmes were a horrible mix-up.

Oh, there were flashes—times when, for several seconds at a time, a listener could recognize the voices of the broadcasters, or could catch a scrap of the commentary on a prize fight. But things worth hearing—even for seconds at a time—were rare.

Mostly it was a jumble of serials, advertising, and off-key snatches of what had once been music. It was utterly indiscriminate and utterly unbearable for any length of time.

But curiosity is a powerful motive. There *was* a brief boom in radio sets that morning.

There were other booms, less explicable, less capable of analysis. There was a sudden upswing in the sale of shotguns and side-arms that was reminiscent of that time some years ago when the broadcast of a story by H. G. Wells gave rise to a Martian scare.

Bibles sold as readily as books on astronomy—and books on astronomy sold like hot cakes. One section of the country showed a sudden interest in lightning-rods—builders were deluged with orders for immediate demonstration.

For some reason which has never been clearly ascertained, there was a run on fish-hooks in Mobile, Alabama; every hardware and sports-shop in that city was sold out before noon.

The public libraries had a run on books on Mars. Yes, on Mars—despite the fact that Mars was at the moment on the other side of the Sun and that every newspaper article on the subject stressed the fact that *no* planet was between Earth and the constellation Leo.

And not a radio station on Earth was on the air that morning.

Newspapers were passed from hand to hand because the presses couldn't keep up with the demand. *No news on the radio* —and something big was happening. People waited, in mobs, outside the newspaper offices for each new edition to appear. Circulation managers went quietly mad.

People gathered in curious little knots about the broadcasting studios. MID Network doors were locked, although there was a doorman on duty to admit technicians, who were trying to find an answer to the unprecedented difficulty. Some, who had been on duty the previous day, had now spent twenty-four hours without sleep.

George Baily woke at noon, with only a slight headache. He turned on his radio and turned it off again quickly.

He shaved and showered, went out and drank a light breakfast, and was himself again. He bought early editions of the afternoon papers, read them, and grinned. His hunch had been right; whatever was wrong with radio, it was nothing trivial.

But *what* was wrong?

The later editions of the evening papers had it:

EARTH INVADED, SAYS SCIENTIST

Thirty-six-line type was the biggest they had; they used it. Not

a copy of a newspaper was delivered at any home that evening. News-boys starting on their routes were practically mobbed. They sold papers instead of delivering them; the smart ones got twice the usual price for them.

The foolish ones who didn't want to sell, because the papers had been bought for their routes, lost them anyway; people grabbed them.

The later editions and the finals changed the heading only slightly—from a typographical viewpoint. But it was a big change, just the same:

EARTH INVADED, SAY SCIENTISTS

Funny what moving an " s " from the ending of a verb to the ending of a noun can do.

Carnegie Hall shattered precedents that evening with a lecture given at midnight. An unscheduled and unadvertised lecture. Professor Helmetz had stepped off the train at 11.30, and a mob of reporters had been waiting for him.—Helmetz, of Harvard, had been the scientist—singular—who had made the first headlines.

Harvey Ambers, Director of the Board of Carnegie Hall, had pushed his way through the mob. He arrived minus glasses, hat, and breath, but got hold of Helmetz's arm and hung on until he could talk again. " We want you to talk at Carnegie, Professor," he shouted into Helmetz's ear. " Thousand bucks for a lecture on the invaders! "

" Certainly. Tomorrow afternoon? "

" Now! I've a cab waiting. Come on."

" But . . . but . . ."

" We'll get you an audience. Hurry! " He turned to the mob. " Let us through! You can't hear the Professor here. Come to Carnegie and he'll talk to you. Spread the word."

The word spread so well that Carnegie Hall was jammed by midnight, when the Professor began to speak. By 12.30, they'd rigged a loud-speaker system so the people outside could hear. By one o'clock in the morning the streets were jammed for blocks around.

There wasn't a sponsor on Earth with a million dollars to his name who wouldn't have given a million dollars to sponsor the broadcasting of that lecture—but it was not broadcast on the radio. The line was busy.

" Questions? " asked Professor Helmetz.

A reporter in the front row made it first. " Professor," he asked, " have *all* direction-finding stations on Earth confirmed your statement as to the change this afternoon? "

"Yes, absolutely. At about noon, the directional indications began to grow weaker. At 1447, New York time, they ceased completely. Until then, the radio waves emanated from the sky, constantly changing direction with reference to the Earth's surface, but *constant* with reference to the constellation Leo."

"What star in Leo?"

"No star. Merely a point in the sky coinciding exactly with the position of no visible star on the most minute charts. At 1447, all direction-finders went dead, but the signals persisted. They came from all sides equally. The invaders were here. There is no other conclusion to be drawn. Earth is now surrounded, completely blanketed, by radio waves that have *no point of origin*, that travel ceaselessly around the Earth in all directions, changing shape at will. This at the moment seems to be in imitation of the Earth-origin signals that attracted their attention, and brought them here."

"From nowhere? From just a point in space?"

"Why not, sir? They are creatures of *ether*, not of matter, and ether permeates space uniformly. Our first indication of their arrival—rather, the arrival of the first ones, if you want to put it that way—came with a repetition of Marconi's S-S-S transatlantic broadcast of forty-six years ago. Apparently that was the first Earth broadcast of sufficient power to send signals that they could perceive at that distance. They started for Earth then, presumably.

"It took twenty-three years for those waves to reach them and twenty-three years for them to reach us. The first to arrive had formed themselves, imitatively, to duplicate the shape, as it were, of the signals that attracted them. Later arrivals were in the form of other waves that they had met, or passed, or absorbed, on their way to Earth. There are now fragments of programmes broadcast as recently as a few days ago . . . er . . .wandering about the ether."

"Professor, can you *describe* one of the invaders?"

"No more than one can describe a radio wave. They *are* radio waves, in effect, although they emanate from no broadcasting station. They are a form of life dependent upon the movement of ether."

"They are different sizes?"

"Yes—in two senses of the word size. Radio waves are measured from crest to crest, which measurement is known as the wave-length. Since the invaders cover the entire dials of our receiving sets, obviously they can—in imitation, undoubtedly, of the waves of ours that they have met—adjust themselves to any frequency, or crest-to-crest wave-length.

" But that is only a crest-to-crest length. The actual length of a radio wave is much greater. If a broadcasting station sends out a programme of one second's duration, the velocity of the wave carrying that programme is one light-second, or 186,270 miles. On that basis, the individual . . . er . . . invaders vary in length from a hundred thousand miles long—less than a second in duration—to about five million miles long—almost half a minute in duration. Each is in constant movement at the speed of light, and each wave, as it were, extends many times, or many thousands of times, around the Earth."

" But why assume, Professor Helmetz, that these . . . these waves are living things? Why not just inanimate waves? "

" An inanimate wave, as you call it, would follow certain laws. Just as inanimate matter follows certain laws. An animal can climb uphill, however, or run in circles, or climb a tree. A stone can do none of these unless impelled by some outside force. It is the same with these invaders. They are living things because they show volition, because they are not limited in direction of travel, because they can change their form—because they *retain their identity*; two signals never come together on the same radio or conflict with one another. They follow one another but do not come simultaneously. They do not blend as signals on the same wave-length would ordinarily do. They follow laws and rules of their own. They are *not* merely radio waves."

" But, Professor, are they intelligent beings? "

Professor Helmetz took off his glasses and polished them thoughtfully. He said finally, " I doubt if we shall ever know. The intelligence of such beings, if any, would be on such a completely different plane from ours that there would be no common point from which we could start intercourse. We are material; they are immaterial. I do not think there can ever be common ground between us."

" But if they are intelligent at all, Professor—"

" Ants are intelligent, after a fashion. Even if one calls it instinct that enables them to do such marvellous things, instinct is still a form of intelligence. Yet we cannot communicate with ants; we shall be less likely to communicate with the invaders. The difference in type between ant intelligence and ours would be nothing to the difference in type between the intelligence of the invaders and our own. What *could* we have to say to one another? "

The professor must have had something there. Communication with the vaders—a clipped form, of course, of " invaders " —was never established.

Radio stocks stabilized on the Exchange. Then the day after

the midnight lecture, someone asked Dr. Helmetz the crucial question and the newspapers published his answer.

" Resume broadcasting? I don't know. Not until the invaders go away, and why should they? Unless, of course, radio communication is perfected on some other planet in some other galaxy, and they're attracted there."

" And if they did go away—? "

" Oh, they'd come back when we started to broadcast again."

Radio stocks dropped to practically zero in an hour. Radio musicians took jobs in theatres, bars, and the like. And failed completely to fulfil the increased demand for talent. With radio out, other forms of entertainment boomed.

Magazine sales boomed. Cinemas boomed. Variety was coming back. Everything boomed except radio.

" One down," said George Baily. The barman asked what he meant.

" I dunno, Hank. I've got a hunch."

" What kind of hunch? "

" I don't even know that. Shake me up one more of those, and I'll go home."

The electric shaker wouldn't work, and Hank had to shake it up by hand.

" Exercise, that's what you need," said George. " Take some of that fat off you."

Hank grunted and the ice tinkled merrily as he tilted the shaker to pour out the drink.

George Baily drank it leisurely and strolled out into an April thundershower. He stood under the awning and watched for a taxi. An old man was standing in front of him.

" Some weather," George said.

The old man grinned at him. " You noticed it? "

" Huh? Noticed what? "

" Just watch a while, mister. Just watch a while."

The old man moved on. George stood there quite a while before he grasped it. His jaw dropped a trifle, and then he closed his mouth and went back into the bar. He went into a phone booth and called Pete Mulvaney.

He got three wrong numbers and spent four nickels before Pete's voice said, " Hullo."

" George Baily, Pete. Listen, the weather. Notice it? "

" Yes. What's it mean, you want to know. So do I. You tell me. I think it's—" A crackling sound on the wire blurred it out.

" Hey, Pete! You there? "

The sound of a violin. Pete Mulvaney didn't play the violin.

" Hey, Pete! What in—"

Pete's voice again. " Come on over, George. This isn't going to last long. Bring—" a buzzing noise and then a voice that was not Pete's said—" Come to Carnegie Hall. The best tunes of all come to Carnegie Hall. Yes, the best tunes of all come to Car—"

George slammed down the receiver.

He walked through the rain to Pete's place. On the way he bought a bottle of Scotch. Pete had started to tell him to bring something, and maybe, he thought, that was what it was.

It was.

They poured a drink apiece and lifted them. The lights flickered briefly, went out, and then on again.

" No lightning," said George. " No lightning and pretty soon no lighting. They're taking over the telephone. What do they do with lightning, though? "

" Eat it, maybe."

" No lightning," said George. " I can get by without a telephone, and candles and oil lamps aren't bad for lights, but I'm going to miss lightning. I *like* lightning."

Pete Mulvaney leaned back in his chair. He said, " Electric lights, electric toasters, electric hair-curlers, vacuum cleaners. Electric power, and—cars and aeroplanes and Diesel-engined boats. George, do you know no petrol engine can work without electricity? "

" What? For a starter, yes, but can't it be cranked by hand? "

" Of course, but the *spark*."

" Yes, the spark. Hey, how about these new rocket planes? Those, too? "

" Those, too."

" Films? "

" Definitely, films. You couldn't work a projector with an oil lamp. You need concentrated light for that. And sound-tracks—well, that's electricity *per se*."

George Baily shook his head slowly. " All right, cut out cinemas, trams, lorries, tanks, toasters. See what it means, Pete? "

Pete poured another drink. " It means we're going back to the original source of horsepower—horses. If you want to invest, buy horses. Particularly mares; mares are going to be worth their weight in gold."

" Hey, though, there are steam engines. Locomotives."

Pete Mulvaney nodded. " The iron horse. We'll be back to it for the long hauls, and back to Dobbin for the short ones. Can you ride? "

George sipped his drink slowly. " Used to when I was a kid. Guess I can learn again. That'll be fun. And say—"

" What? "

" I used to play the cornet when I was a kid. Think I'll get one and learn again. That'll be fun, too. And maybe I'll dig myself in somewhere and write that nov—Say, what about printing? "

" They printed books long before electricity. Take a while to readjust the printing industry, but there'll be books and magazines, all right."

George Baily grinned and got up. He walked over to the window and looked out and down into the storm. A tram had stalled in the middle of the block outside. Behind him, the lights flickered again. A car stopped, then started more slowly, stopped again. A neon light across the way suddenly went dark.

He looked up at the sky and sipped his drink.

" No lightning," he said. He was going to *miss* the lightning.

The change-over, for a wonder, went smoothly. The Government created one board with practically unlimited authority, and under it three subsidiary ones. The main board was called the Economic Readjustment Bureau, and its job was to co-ordinate the efforts of the three subsidiary boards and to decide, quickly and without delay, any jurisdictional disputes among them.

First of the three subsidiary boards was the Transport Bureau. It immediately took over temporary control of all the railways, organized the use of steam locomotives, and solved the problems of running railways without telegraphy and electric signals. It dictated, then, what should be transported, in order of relative importance.

All horses were declared wards of the Government, graded according to capabilities, and put to work or to stud. Draught horses were used for only the most essential kinds of hauling. The breeding programme was given the fullest possible emphasis; the Bureau estimated that the equine population would double in two years, and that within six or seven years there would be a horse in every garage in the country.

The second board, the Manpower Relocation Bureau, functioned just as one would deduce from its title. It handled unemployment benefits for the millions thrown temporarily out of work and helped relocate them—not too difficult a task, in view of the tremendously increased demand for manual labour.

The third board had the most difficult job of the three. It was called the Factory Readjustment Bureau. It coped with the stupendous task of converting factories, filled with electrically-

operated machinery and, for the most part, tooled for the production of other electrically-operated machinery, over to the production, without electricity, of essential non-electrical articles.

The few available stationary steam engines worked twenty-four-hour shifts in those early days, and the first thing they were given to do was to run stampers and planers and millers turning out more stationary steam engines, of all sizes. These, in turn, were first put to work making still more. Only when steam engines were in full production were they assigned to running machinery for the manufacture of other articles: oil lamps, clothing, coal stoves, oil stoves, bath-tubs, and bedsteads.

Not quite all the big factories were converted. For, during the conversion period, individual handicrafts sprang up in thousands of places. Little one- and two-man shops made and repaired furniture, shoes, candles, all sorts of things that *could* be made without complex machinery. At first these small shops made small fortunes because they had no competition. Later, they bought small steam engines to run small machines, and held their own, growing with the boom that accompanied the return to normal employment and buying power.

There *was* suffering, during the period of economic readjustment, but less than there had been during the great depression of the early 1930's. And the recovery was quicker. Because the situation that faced the country—and all other countries—in 1947 was clear-cut and obvious. No more electricity. Readjust for steam and horsepower. As simple and clear as that, and no ifs or ands or buts. By 1954 . . .

It was a rainy day in April, and George Baily was waiting under the sheltering roof of the little railway station at Blakestown, Connecticut, to see who might come in on the 3.14.

It chugged in at 3.25 and came to a panting stop: three coaches and a luggage-van. The van door opened and a sack of mail was handed out and the door closed again. No luggage, so probably no passengers would—

Then, at the sight of a tall dark man swinging down from the platform of the rear coach, George Baily let out a shout of delight: "Pete! Pete Mulvaney! What the devil—"

"Baily, by all that's holy! What are you doing here?"

George was wringing his hand. "Me? I live here. Two years now. I bought the *Blakestown Weekly* in '52, for a song, and I run it—editor, reporter, and caretaker. Got one printer to help me out with that side of the business, and Maisie does the social items. She's—"

"Maisie? Maisie Hetterman?"

" Maisie Baily now. We got married the same time I bought the paper and moved here. What are you doing here, Pete? "

" Business. Just here overnight, to see a man named Wilcox."

" Oh, our local eccentric—but don't get me wrong; he's a clever fellow, all right. Well, you can see him tomorrow. You're coming home with me now for dinner and to spend the night. Maisie'll be glad to see you. Come on, my buggy's over here."

" I'd like to. Have you finished whatever you were here for? "

" Yes, just to pick up the news on who came in on the train. And *you* came in, so here we go." They got in the buggy, and George picked up the reins and said, " Gee up, Bessie," to the mare. Then, " What are you doing now, Pete? "

" Research. For a gas-supply company. Been working on a more efficient mantle, one that'll give more light and be less destructible. This fellow Wilcox wrote us he had something along that line; the company sent me up to look it over. If it's what he claims, I'll take him back to New York with me and let the company lawyers loose on him."

" How's business, otherwise? "

" Great, George. *Gas*—that's the thing. Every new home's being piped for it, and plenty of the old ones. How about you? "

" We've got it. Luckily, we had one of the old presses that ran the metal pot off a gas burner, so it was already piped in. And our home is right over the office, so all we had to do was pipe it up a flight. Great stuff, gas. How's New York? "

" Fine, George. Down to its last million people, and stabilizing there. No crowding, and plenty of room for everybody. The *air*—why, it's better than Atlantic City, without petrol fumes."

" Enough horses to go round yet? "

" Almost. But bicycling's the craze; the factories can't turn out enough to meet the demand. There's a cycling club in almost every block, and all the able-bodied cycle to and from work. Doing 'em good, too; a few more years, and the doctors will go out of business."

" You've got a bike? "

" Sure, a pre-vader one. I average five miles a day on it, and I eat like a horse."

George Baily chuckled. " I'll have Maisie include some hay in the dinner. Well, here we are. Whoa, Bessie."

An upstairs window went up, and Maisie looked out and down. She called out, " Hullo there, Pete! "

" Extra plate, Maisie," George called. " We'll be up soon as I put the horse away and show Pete round downstairs."

He led Pete from the barn into the back door of the print-shop. " Our press! " he announced proudly, pointing.

"How does it work? Where's your steam engine?"

George grinned. "I've got one on order, coming up in a month or so. When we get it, Pop Jenkins, my printer, is going to put himself out of a job by teaching me to run it. With the press going, I can handle the whole thing myself."

"Rather rough on Pop?"

George shook his head. "Pop eagerly awaits the day. He's sixty-nine and wants to retire. He's just staying on until I can do without him. Here's the press, and this is the office, in front. Messy, but efficient."

Mulvaney looked around and grinned. "George, you've found your niche. You were cut out for a small-town editor."

"I should say so! I have more fun than anyone else. Believe it or not, I work like a dog and like it. Come on upstairs."

On the stairs, Pete asked, "And the novel?"

"Half finished, and it isn't bad. But it isn't the novel I was going to write; I was a cynic then. Now—"

"George, I think the waveries were your best friends."

"Waveries?"

"Lord, how long does it take slang to get from New York out to the backwoods? The vaders, of course. Some professor who specializes in studying them described one as a wavery place in the ether, and 'wavery' stuck . . . Hullo there, Maisie, my girl. You look marvellous."

Dinner was leisurely. Almost apologetically, George brought out beer, in cold bottles. "Sorry, Pete, haven't anything stronger to offer you. But I haven't been drinking lately."

"*You* on the wagon, George?"

"Not on the wagon, exactly. Didn't swear off or anything, but haven't had a drink of strong liquor for almost a year. I don't know why, but—"

"I do," said Pete Mulvaney. "I know exactly why you don't—because I don't drink much either. We don't drink because we don't *have* to . . . Say, isn't that a *radio* over there?"

George chuckled. "A souvenir. Wouldn't sell it for a fortune. Once in a while I like to look at it and think of the awful nonsense I used to churn out for it. And then I go over and click the switch and nothing happens. Just silence. Silence is the most wonderful thing in the world sometimes, Pete. Of course, I couldn't do that if there was any power, because I'd get vaders then. I suppose they're still doing business at the same old address?"

"Yes, the Research Bureau checks daily. They try to get up current with a little generator run by a steam turbine. But it's no good; the vaders suck it up as fast as it's generated."

"Do you suppose they'll ever go away?"

Mulvaney shrugged. "Helmetz thinks not. He thinks they propagate in proportion to the available electricity. Even if the development of radio broadcasting somewhere else in the universe would attract them there, some would stay here—and multiply like flies the minute we tried to use electricity again. And meanwhile, they live on the electricity in the air. What do you do in the evenings up here?"

"Do? Read, write, visit one another, go to the amateur dramatic groups—Maisie's chairman of the Blakestown Players, and I play small parts in it. With the cinema out, everybody goes in for theatricals, and we've found some real talent. And there's the chess-and-chequers club, and cycle trips and picnics . . . There isn't time enough. Not to mention music. Everybody plays an instrument, or is trying to."

"You?"

"Certainly! First cornet in the Silver Concert Band, with solo parts. And—good heavens! There's a rehearsal tonight, and we're giving a concert on Sunday. I hate to desert you but—"

"Can't I come round and join in? I've got my flute in the brief case here and—"

"*Flute?* We're short on flutes. Bring that around and Si Perkins, our director, will practically pressgang you into staying over for the concert on Sunday—and it's only three days, so why not? Get it out now; we'll play a few old favourites to warm up. Hey, Maisie, leave those dishes and come on and play the piano!"

While Pete Mulvaney went to the guest room to get his flute from the brief case, George Baily picked up his cornet from the top of the piano and blew a soft, plaintive little minor run on it. Clear as a bell; he was in good shape tonight.

And with the shining silver thing in his hand he wandered over to the window and stood looking out into the night. It was dusk, and the rain had stopped. A high-stepping horse clop-clopped by, and the bell of a bicycle jangled. Somebody across the street was strumming a guitar and singing. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

The scent of spring was soft and sweet in the moist air.

Peace and dusk and distant rolling thunder. Thunder, but—"I wish," he said softly, "there was a bit of lightning. I *miss* the lightning."

★ ★ ★

The best part of the fiction in many novels is the notice that the characters are all purely imaginary.

F. P. ADAMS

CAP MONEY

The moon brushed the blade of the knife; it shone in her steady eyes

by AUDREY ERSKINE LINDOP

THE Kid came along with the Pikies. She had a tiny, pointed, weathered face and sleepy nut-brown eyes. She was two days past eighteen but she could have been mistaken for fourteen. Although her mother had given her a christian name she never remembered being addressed as anything else but " Kid."

It was the first time she had ever been to London. For several hours she wandered about where the lorry dropped her. She had nowhere to go and nothing to do, and the belt of her coat was hanging loose. It was evening before she ran into the Pikies. They recognized gipsy blood. They stopped and asked if she was one of them. She said that she did not know. She had never heard gipsies called Pikies before. She knew no London terms.

The Pikies were going to The Man At Arms and invited the Kid to accompany them. She gave them a smile and asked no questions. She seemed grateful for somewhere to go. She sat on a bench in the public bar and nursed a Scotch and ginger-ale as if it had been a bomb. When she saw Burke in the opposite corner she kept her strange brown eyes on him. He might have been the first man she had ever seen.

The Pikies were running a deal. They were selling a vanload of chinaware and they were selling the van as well. They lined samples of china along the bar. They had forgotten about the Kid.

Burke was not in on the deal. It was too small time for him. But he liked to watch these London gipsy traders conducting a business transaction. It was the only time that his mouth relaxed, when he witnessed a Pikie deal. Their language and ways were less foreign to him than they were to the Kid in the corner. He often ran into the Pikies. Four out of the five of this lot could neither read nor write. When a deal was concluded and due to be " signed," a hand was held out palm upwards. The bidder or the seller slapped it down. It was the seal to the Pikie agreement, more binding than any written contract.

Burke had come into The Man At Arms to question a contact.

A warehouse job had tripped. Burke wished to know the reason. Dice and Echo had come with him to help him extract the answer. Echo nudged Burke and whispered to him, "Who's the kid, Doc, who's the kid?" Burke gave the Kid a casual glance, shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head. But Echo turned and winked at her.

The Pikies were haggling about the price: "One and a quarter" meant a hundred and twenty-five pounds, a "ton" was a hundred, and a "handful" meant five—one pound representing a finger. Both the bidder and the seller had supporters to talk on their behalf. They were called the "geer-ups." Their task was to beat up the interest and they were paid for their assistance. They spoke for the side they represented in no uncertain terms. They acted as unofficial agents to lower or raise the price in question and to press the deal in hand.

When the deal was concluded and the palm had been slapped the bidder paid up in full. The money was collected in the caps of the selling party and the geer-ups received their dues.

It amused Burke to take off the Pikie methods when he wished to extract what was owed to him. He would go round and stand with his hat held out, grinning his ice-cool grin. Many a gang leader took a step backwards when Burke came to call for his Cap Money. Burke had persuasive ways.

There was only one geer-up to a side that evening. The seller's geer-up was a slightly-built man but he forgot his size in drink. He turned aggressively round upon Burke. His voice was deliberate and thickly sarcastic: "You'd think some folks might have something better to do than sit about earwigging, wouldn't you?"

Burke's voice was soft when he answered, "If you don't want me to listen, speak lower, boy."

The barman leaned quickly across the counter. "Watch out, Pat, that's the *Doc*!"

The seller's geer-up lost the colour from his face. He turned on his heel and walked out.

Burke, grinning, took over his job. The van and the china changed hands and it went for the seller's price; the buyer did not care to argue much with the Doc as a geer-up.

Off came the caps to collect the money. Burke took off his own dark trilby to gather his dues as a geer-up. He grinned when the seller dropped a fiver into it. He was the only one to collect a "handful" of commission. He slapped the fiver down on the counter and said, "Knock it down, Joe, all round."

It was seldom that Burke hit anything near good humour. Dice and Echo made the most of it. It was a drink for a drink

with the Pikies and the man that fell out was no man. Dice and Echo put in overtime to prove that they were men.

Burke worked a number of rackets. He had the controlling finger in nearly every pie. There was hardly a job in the neighbourhood that he was not directly behind. He had done well for a boy who was born in the country and was meant for a farmer's lad.

When he drank he remembered the country and he gave the others hell: "Turnips!" he roared at them. "I ran away from turnips and I end up with turnips now!"

It amused him to talk of his "practice." He frequently dispensed a little medicine to a patient who was not doing well. The treatment was varied in needs. It was usually Dice and Echo who did the actual doctoring but Burke liked to supervise. Sometimes they gave a tonic to tone a patient up; or Burke prescribed a course of massage to break a patient's resistance down, and sometimes, if the case was very stubborn, Burke prescribed the knife.

There was not a grown man in the neighbourhood who was not afraid of Burke's treatment. If you found yourself on that Doctor's panel it was wiser to keep yourself healthy. His doses had sometimes proved fatal.

The Kid was still hunched in the corner when the Pikies left the bar. She was clutching the Scotch and ginger-ale which she had never once put to her lips.

Joe leaned across the counter. "Hey! Someone left something behind."

Burke was about to question her when his warehouse job came in. The man was red in the face and shifty-eyed. He had taken on quite a load of liquor before he had dared to face Burke. When he saw Dice and Echo he ducked for the door. Dice and Echo trapped him. Burke had only prescribed a light massage to soften the patient up.

It was the drink for a drink with the Pikies that did it.

It had turned the hands of Dice and Echo into pummelling, leaden lumps. Echo stood staring down at the body, "He musta had a heart or something. He musta had a heart. Honest, we worked him lightly, Doc. Honest, honest, Doc."

Burke knelt on the floor to examine the man. "If he had a heart it's stopped."

Joe never presented a problem. He was too frightened of treatment from Burke. He knew how to answer questions. Yes, he believed there was some kind of fight. No, he could not identify anyone. At the time he was down in the cellars. When

he came up the place was empty and the man was stretched out on the floor.

They were just about to leave The Man At Arms when Burke's eye was caught by the Kid. He said, " Pick her up. She saw too much."

She put up no form of resistance when they bullied her into the car. But when they passed a policeman on point-duty she sat forward to open her mouth. It was Echo who slapped her back. Burke stood six foot two in socks. He had not a gentle grip. The Kid made no sound when he twisted her wrist but he noticed her licking it afterwards with a tiny pointed tongue as a kitten might work on a wounded paw.

Burke's flat ran the length of his office. He worked an estate agent's business as a front and an income-tax dodge. He had been worried about it lately. He found it was making money. That was queer for he ran it straight. It would be embarrassing to be landed with a legitimate business that threatened to outstrip his practice.

When they brought the Kid in, she caused quite a sensation.

Diana was Dice's girl-friend but she meant to end up with Burke. She left her hands still on the typewriter and she burnt a hole through the Kid with her eyes. Moose and Brady stood up and stared.

Burke said, " O.K., O.K., we have a visitor." He pushed the Kid before him and locked her in the bathroom. It seemed the safest place. Then he looked round the smoke-fouled room. " We don't want to worry the cops," he said. " The cops have got troubles enough."

" Sure," Dice agreed. " We don't want to cause them a moment's worry, but how do we get rid of her without?"

" I'm relieved," Diana told them, " that we're going to get rid of her. I thought she'd come to stay."

Diana went back to a home at night where her parents asked questions about her day. They were an elderly couple and mild. They believed every word she said. If their daughter was late or failed to return they were not unduly worried. They were told that she stayed with a friend. When Diana first worked in Burke's office she was completely deceived by the " front." By the time she realized what went on behind it she had ceased to care for anything or anyone but Burke. She bit her lips when she stared at the Kid.

Moose had a mole on his chin. Brady was short and fat. He jerked his chin towards the Kid. " How did we come by that?"

Echo said, " She saw too much. Saw too much."

Burke said, " I'll get the dope on her."

He sat on the edge of the bath. She did not seem afraid of him. She liked his soft grey eyes, and the lines that ran up from a gentle mouth as if he should have laughed a lot and had somehow misused the lines. She prattled on easily enough.

At first it was such a normal story Burke could have told it himself. She had walked out on the usual set-up: drunken father, brawling stepmother, a home that was never a home. She had hitch-hiked her way from the north. She struck out for her empty freedom with no money, no hopes, and no plans. When the Pikies stopped and spoke to her she was glad of a friendly voice. Her mother had been a gipsy and married a man with a house. The mother had stifled inside it. She was dead before the Kid grew up, and the stepmother ruled the home. The Kid came to London to make her fortune. Burke asked her how she intended to use it. For the very first time she smiled at him—go back to the country, of course.

Burke went back to the smoke-fouled room. He told the five who were enveloped by it, " There's not a soul to care about her. We've only to think of a way."

He was wrong about nobody asking questions. The Pikies called round at the flat. They were the five he had seen at The Man At Arms. They were all good, solid boys. They made ten in the room with Burke and his men. Diana expected trouble. She removed all the china and glass. She was house-proud in her way.

But the Pikies were ornately polite. They were sorry to take up Burke's time. They had come to make a few inquiries. One night they had picked up a kid. She had actually nothing to do with them but they had recognized one of their blood. They smiled when they said that they felt responsible for her running into Burke. They made no threats and they never raised their voices, but they gave Burke to understand that if any harm should come to her he would answer directly to them.

The Pikies were not on his panel. Burke offered to make a deal with them. " If you keep your traps shut about the kid being here with me—just at the moment we don't want to see the Police—she'll come to no harm," he said, and he added, " Here's my hand on it." He held out an upturned palm. One of the Pikies struck it. He had signed a Pikie pledge.

When they left, Echo was worried, " Gee, Doc! Gee, Doc! " he said. " You have to keep a Pikie pledge."

They planned a holiday down by the sea for the Kid. Even an estate agent's secretary had two weeks off a year and what was more natural than to go off with her favourite girl-friend?

The first week the Kid would enjoy herself. Diana would have a liberal expense account. The second week tragedy would strike. Diana would know how to answer questions: they were going for a climb along the cliffs and the kid must have missed her footing.

They would choose a secluded Cornish bay and fix the date and make sure of the rooms.

But when Dice jerked open the door of the bathroom the Kid had disappeared. She was frightened by now of Burke's eyes. She must have gone down the drain-pipe. It was a perilous, tooth-edging climb. Burke sent the boys out to comb the district for her. Their efforts to find her failed.

It must have been after midnight when she came through the bathroom door. She had climbed back up the drain-pipe. She stood there looking up at Burke as if he had been a friend.

Diana said, "Give her some treatment. We'd better know where she's talked."

Burke told her, "Mind your own business if you don't want it minded for you."

He questioned the Kid for an hour and a half. She had run off to find the Pikies but no one knew what Pikie meant. She had found herself up in the West End. Burke guessed what she did not tell him. She had never felt more lonely in the whole of her lonely life. She had turned her steps wearily back to him because she knew no other home. Even the bathroom must have seemed better than the empty rain-dashed streets. She was exhausted and hungry and drenched.

With an effort she managed to smile at him, dejection had cast out fear. The smile took the sour smell of the smoke from the room. It made Burke think of heather with a heady, carefree wind above it, whipping up evening scents. He felt stifled inside the room. He opened the windows savagely and let the rain drive in. Dice would have said he was crazy and Echo would have said it twice.

He made the Kid coffee himself. He flung her a towel and told her, "You'd better get into the bath."

Diana said, "Well, Sir Galahad, when do we make our Cornish trip?"

Burke struck her across the mouth.

He kept wriggling out of the trip. He had a number of useful excuses. "What's the good of you pushing her off a cliff? She can climb like a mountain-goat."

Diana said, "Maybe she's not so good at swimming."

Burke said, " It's crazy the way she came back. We'd better lie low for a bit. Maybe she did talk to someone—and I gave the Pikies my hand on that deal."

" Of course," Diana purred at him, " we mustn't break our word—after all, we were born a boy scout."

Burke's temper grew worse by the hour. He lashed out like a lion with a festering sore as if the other five were flies that settled on it. " I can't breathe in this smoke-crammed hole. Did any of you ever stop to see a sunset? Did you ever feel grass on your feet? Or smell hay, or dig potatoes? Did you ever walk through the heather when the dew has just come down? Get out, you lice, get out! "

They stayed out of his way when they could. Moose sighed. " If the Doc doesn't lay off the bottle he's gonna kill himself."

" Or he's gonna kill somebody else," said Echo. " Or he's gonna kill somebody else."

Burke had only to cast his eyes on them to throw a fresh outbreak. He was bored with them, pitifully bored with them. He was bored with the set-up, the crew, and the life. It was like giving fresh birth to himself. He screamed aloud with resentful agony. His practice had turned deadly sour in his mouth. He felt as lonely and lost as the Kid.

It was Dice who diagnosed the symptoms. " Heaven help us! He wants to go straight! "

" There's only one way to help *him*," said Diana. " And that's to get rid of the Kid."

Sometimes he vented his spleen on the Kid and sometimes he wanted to talk to her. It depended on how much he had drunk.

" They're driving me crazy in this place," he told her. " I'm going to get back to turnips that don't pretend to think. Here! " and he flapped two typewritten sheets before her. " How about this for a start? He's asking a darn sight too much for it but I've a good mind to give him the price myself."

It was a farm property that had found its way onto the books of the agency downstairs. It stood on the Yorkshire moors. Burke pondered upon it moodily. His hair stood on end and his eyes were clouded.

" It would take a bit of working up, but you could make it a wonderful place." He read aloud some of the snags, " No water, no heating, no lights, no inside sanitation! Well, there'd be quite a few compensations—no Diana, no Echo, no Moose, no Brady, no Dice! Well, what do you say, Kid? Do you mind outside sanitation and water from wells? "

More often he vented his spleen on her. He nearly gave her treatment once. He put a hand on her chest and sent her back-

wards against a wall. He threw a bottle of Scotch at the spot where she fell. " I suppose you think you're getting round me? Well, let me tell you I hate your scrawny guts. I can get dames with thighs like cushions. I can get 'em with ice that big on their fingers—" he made a circle to show the diamond's size—" And I don't have to pay for them, either. Some other guy does that. I like 'em with thighs like cushions. I hate your scrawny guts."

The Kid picked herself up and limped back to the bathroom. The door was no longer locked.

" She's poisoning him," Diana said, " We've got to make him act."

They chose the end of a three-day bout. All five of them went to work on him. They spoke softly as if he were mentally sick.

" It'll pass, Doc, it'll pass," soothed Echo.

" Sure, everyone goes through it some time, Doc," Moose assured him. " I nearly went straight myself, through a dame."

" Me, too," Brady told him. " I nearly came unstuck for a red-head once. I thought her hair was natural and I promised to work for her Dad."

" It's hell while it lasts," said Dice, " but you're gonna pull yourself out of it Doc. You're gonna get well again."

" There's only one cure," Diana insisted. " That kid's been around too long."

Burke said wearily, " O.K., O.K., O.K." He was willing to give it another chance.

They packed the Kid into the car. Burke, Dice, and Echo took on the job. They had given Burke the knife. They drove to Clapham Common.

They laid low until there was nobody moving to disturb the black heat of the night. Then they dragged the Kid out of the car.

Dice said, " Look, Kid, the Doc wants to talk to you. You're going for a nice little walk."

She doubled back and ran. Dice and Echo were out of condition. They panted along like bears. But Burke found a second wind. The Kid streaked, a zigzagging hare, in front of him, but Burke was gaining on her. Resentment lent him wings. He blamed the Kid for the whole of the burning upheaval that had racked him the past few weeks. He blamed her for the inner rebellion that had turned him against his way of life. It was a fiercely revengeful hatred that he carried towards the Kid.

She suddenly stopped and turned, as if once again she was weary of trying to escape him. She too took a second chance.

She ran straight back to him like a moth that is drawn to a light. She put herself into his arms with a force that endangered his balance. He stood there, astonished, holding her. They were silent quite a while. Then he lifted her chin and looked into her face, "You must have an outsize faith in me. That's twice you came back to me, *twice*! You must have outsize nerve."

She said nothing, she stood there and nestled against him. He said, defeated, "All right. All right."

Then he kicked her feet from under her. She squeaked as she fell to the ground. He bent over her holding the knife. The moon brushed the edge of it and it shone in her steady eyes.

She lay there looking up at him. Burke raised his arm and struck. But it was not the knife that fell on her. He left two crisp five-pound notes in her hand.

"Who cares about outside sanitation? No Diana, no Echo, no Dice—Play dead till you hear the car start up. Then get the hell off this rubbish dump—it's no place for a kid at night. Go to The Man At Arms and ask for Joe. He'll put you on to the Pikies. I gave them my hand on a deal—just tell them I called you my Cap Money—and I'll pick you up when I can."

The Kid clung to one of his fingers. She had never used his name before. She said, "Burke, when you do come to fetch me —you won't frighten me any more?"

He shook his head, "When I fetch you I'll have made the break, Kid. You won't need guts against me again."

★ ★ ★

EARLY WORM

In one of Addison Mizner's workshops, brand-new furniture was scarred, bruised, and acid-bitten into antiquity in a few hours. Men rubbed it with broken beer bottles, then battered it with chains attached to a stick, then painted it with chemicals to give it the complexion of ages past. Freshly-made chairs and benches were planed and filed to simulate erosion by the plush flanks of generations of Castilian noblemen. The wormholes in the Mizner furniture were usually jabbed in with an icepick, but Wilson Mizner, a perfectionist, insisted on shooting them in with a Daisy air rifle. Showing two friends over the antiquing factory, he gave them air rifles and set them to popping away at a dining-room set.

"Don't shoot straight at it!" shouted Wilson. "Shoot from the side. Remember, a worm always charges at a piece of furniture from an angle."

ALVA JOHNSTON, *The Incredible Mizners*

FIRST LOVE

The magic of first love is our ignorance that it can ever end

BENJAMIN DISRAELI

O my earliest love, who, ere I number'd
Ten sweet summers, made my bosom thrill!
Will a swallow—or a swift, or some bird—
Fly to her and say, I love her still?

Say my life's a desert drear and arid,
To its one green spot I aye recur:
Never, never—although three times married—
Have I cared a jot for aught but her . . .

O my earliest love, still unforgotten,
With your downcast eyes of dreamy blue!
Never, somehow, could I seem to cotton
To another as I did to you!

C. S. CALVERLEY, 1831–84,
Verses and Fly Leaves

Red Roses for Me

It was a lovely day, red and yellow with maples, when I arrived at Sally's with one dozen of the last red roses of summer in my hand. Sally, as pretty as Cupid, opened the door and stared at me in surprise. "Hullo," she said. "Come in." I doffed my cap, bowed, and went in to her pleasant airy parlour. "I would like to speak to you alone, please."

Sally smiled. "Sure. Sit down."

I handed her the box. "This is for you so you will remember me. I go soon to the States where life is hard. You may never see me again."

"Oh," she said sadly. She took the box and opened it.

She was filled with delight. Her eyes lighted, her cheeks became flame. She brushed against my cheek a small memorable kiss like a little brush of fire. "How beautiful! How beautiful!" she cried, taking the flowers in her arms, looking herself like a giant rose in their midst. "You are the first boy who ever gave me flowers."

I hung my head and brushed my fingers around the edge of my cap.

" You . . . you are . . . the . . . the first girl . . ." I managed.

" I'll put them in water," she said. She went out of the room for a few moments while I went over my poem in my mind. When Sally returned I said solemnly, " I . . . I wish you to be my girl, please. I will not be here, but I will write every day. Some days I will write twice."

In Sally's eyes there were small sparkles of oncoming tears. " I'll write you every day, too. And I'll always remember the roses. I always, really and truly, will. And . . . and I'm sorry I blackened your eye that time."

" Oh," I said easily, " I enjoyed it."

We were silent. A heavy clock ticked tirelessly. " Tell me everything you do," I admonished.

" Oh, I will."

" Now, I would like to say a poem I memorized for you."

Sally sat back, her hands folded, her eyes shining and expectant, her small soft mouth trembling. " Poetry! No one has ever said a poem to me before, either. This is a wonderful day! "

And I said the poem for her, the poem of the red, red rose,

And I will come again, my Luve,
Though it were ten thousand mile!

ROBERT FONTAINE, *My Uncle Louis*

The Young Lovers

The oak laughs with leaves,
The stream laughs in its going,
Dogwood cries to them " Look, how white
My warm midsummer snowing! "
The meadow-homing moths
And fireflies spell their names,
The hills are ranged just so to guard
Their two still flames.
—O world tread softly: here two are
locked in song
Perhaps not long.

TOM BOGGS, *Of Love*

Second Thoughts

Once only do we love truly, and that is in our first love. The loves that follow are more deliberate.

JEAN DE LA BRUYÈRE

La Princesse Lointaine

A few paces from me—on a lawn flanked by green raspberry canes—stood a tall, slender girl in a striped pink dress with a white kerchief on her head.

Four young men clustered round her, and she was tapping them one by one on the forehead with those small grey flowers—I do not know their name, but they are well known to children: these flowers form little bags and burst loudly if you strike them against anything hard.

The young men offered their foreheads so eagerly, and there was in the girl's movements (I saw her in profile) something so enchanting, imperious and caressing, so mocking and charming, that I nearly cried out with wonder and delight, and should, I suppose, at that moment, have given everything in the world to have those lovely fingers tap my forehead too.

My rifle slipped to the grass; I forgot everything; my eyes devoured the graceful figure, the lovely neck, the beautiful arms, the slightly dishevelled fair hair under the white kerchief—the half-closed, perceptive eye, the lashes, the soft cheek beneath them . . .

" Young man! Hey, young man! " suddenly cried a voice near me. " Is it proper to stare at unknown young ladies like that? "

I started violently, and almost fainted: near me, on the other side of the fence stood a man with close-cropped dark hair, looking at me ironically. At the same time the girl too turned towards me . . . I saw large grey eyes in a bright, lively face, and suddenly this face began to quiver and laugh. There was a gleam of white teeth, a droll lift of the eyebrows . . . I blushed terribly, snatched up my gun, and pursued by resonant but not unkind laughter, fled to my room, threw myself on the bed and covered my face with my hands.

My heart leaped within me. I felt very ashamed and unusually gay. I was extraordinarily excited.

IVAN TURGENEV, *First Love*, 1860,
translated by ISAIAH BERLIN

Fresh Woods

Yet, my Sybilla, oft first love must perish,
Like the poor snowdrop, boyish love of Spring,
Born pale to die and strew the path of triumph
Before the imperial glowing of the rose,
Whose passion conquers all.

THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES, 1803–49

AT THE FAIR

by GIOVANNI GUARESCHI

★

The famous Italian author of the lovable book, "The Little World of Don Camillo," now turns his humorist's eye on his own family in his latest story, "The House that Nino Built." The translation is by Frances Frenaye.

Argosy here presents his delightful description of an outing with his little daughter.

★

ALL this talk about birthdays makes me think back to a time when my daughter, the Duchess, had had only about five birthdays.

It's quite tiring, under any circumstances, to visit the Industrial Fair. After making the rounds of all the displays, your legs are bound to crumple. And to go with the Duchess was an enterprise of heroic proportions. The Duchess was not one of those silly children that beg for soft drinks and candies or whine because they just can't go a step farther. She carried her tender years with dignity and discretion. She was very self-controlled and excellent company.

The only trouble was that she had a weakness for heavy machinery. That is why I rewarded her for her good behaviour by taking her to the Industrial Fair and obtaining a special pass to the exhibit of Fiat motors.

As soon as the Red Duchess saw a piece of machinery over six feet high she would bombard me with questions.

"What's that?"

"A Diesel engine."

"Why?"

There's the trouble, in a nutshell. *Why* is a Diesel engine? Once this difficulty has been hurdled, there is more to follow.

"What's its name?"

"Who's its father?"

"Where does it live?"

"Is it a good engine or a bad one?"

The Duchess's curiosity is insatiable, and she must know whether a given machine can read and write, the number of its

brothers and sisters, and so on. She hasn't yet inquired too closely into the matter of morals, but once, in front of a big tractor she shot at me: "Is that one a Communist?" At which point my wife, Margherita, cut her short with a brusque: "Children shouldn't meddle with politics!"

This explains the hazards of taking the Duchess to the Industrial Fair. There was no telling what might attract her attention. Every now and then, for instance, a loudspeaker announced above the clamour of the crowd: "Will the parents of such and such a child call at the Information Desk?".

"Why do they want those parents to call?" she asked.

That one was easy. "Occasionally, some naughty child loses his father and mother, and when he starts bawling his head off, they take him to the Information Desk and notify the parents to call for him there."

"Do the parents spank him?"

"Of course."

"Do they spank him very hard?"

"Fairly hard. They box his ears and then turn him over their knees . . ."

"That's very bad of them. They shouldn't hit their children."

"But children ought to stay close to their fathers and mothers," said Margherita.

"Children are very little, and fathers and mothers are grown up," said the Duchess. "Besides, there are two parents to every child, and they ought to watch out for him."

She had a point there, and so I didn't insist. Margherita thought differently, and their argument took an ugly turn, as arguments between women usually do. More than once, the Duchess had said she couldn't stand living with *her* for another minute and had threatened to run away to her grandparents.

Now, in the heat of the discussion, harsh words flew from one side to the other, and finally the Red Duchess declared: "If you were my daughter, I'd give you a beating with that thing over there!"

The reference to "that thing over there," was innocent enough, since the object to which she was pointing was a steel mast designed for an Argentine ocean steamer and must have weighed at least fifteen tons. I don't mean to condone my daughter's behaviour, but merely to explain the facts of the situation.

After that, we continued our rounds, but when we came to the women's fashion display, Margherita was so absorbed that the Duchess tugged at my sleeve and said disgustedly: "The sight of all those clothes makes her silly. Let's us two go on without her."

I couldn't shuffle off my responsibilities so lightly and so I persuaded her that this was no time to run away together.

"You're just as silly as she is," said the Duchess, staring at me with utter scorn.

In order to keep out of hot water, I pretended to share Margherita's interest in the latest styles. As a result, when we came to the exit from the fashion salon, we suddenly realized that the Duchess was gone.

After each of us had accused the other of gross negligence, we decided to go halves on the blame. We wandered about like lost souls ourselves, while Margherita punctuated her sobs with word-pictures of tiny bodies mangled by man-eating machines. On the main passageway through the Fair, there was a fountain spouting coloured water into a basin, and Margherita rushed to lean over the edge and exclaim: "She may have fallen in here and drowned!"

Fortunately at that moment the loudspeaker boomed:

"Attention, please! Will the grandparents of Carlotta call at the Information Desk? Carlotta is waiting there for them. Attention, please, grandparents of Carlotta!"

Margherita came out with a cry of joy. The next moment she looked at me in bewilderment. "The *grandparents*, they said! We're not the *grandparents*!"

"But she's Carlotta," I said reassuringly. "That's the main thing."

Impulsively we looked around for a taxi, then realizing how idiotic it was to expect to find a taxi in the Fair grounds, we hurried on foot to the Information Desk.

The Duchess was sitting in a corner, looking disdainfully at the other lost children, who were bawling like so many branches cut off from the vine.

"Here are your father and mother!" said one of the guards to the Duchess, as he saw us making signs in her direction.

"I want my grandmother and grandfather!" said the Red Duchess resolutely. "I asked you to call my grandmother and grandfather, didn't I?"

The guard looked perplexed. "She did say she was with her grandparents," he muttered to one of his companions, "and these people are too young for that."

"We're just her parents, that's all!" said Margherita aggrievedly.

"No, you aren't! That isn't true! I want my grandmother and grandfather!" insisted the Duchess.

The scene that ensued was highly pathetic. We identified

ourselves with papers that served absolutely no purpose, because the Red Duchess had no papers to match them and no marks to prove that she was a member of our firm. The guards began to scrutinize us suspiciously and one of them even spoke of calling in the police.

At last I had a bright idea. " Ask the child her grandparents' last name! " I suggested.

Even the most practised criminals have their unguarded moments, and the name supplied by the Red Duchess corresponded with mine.

" Let's go now," I said triumphantly, and the Duchess came along, bloody but unbowed. At the door she turned round and pointed a finger at Margherita.

" *She's* always walking on the grass, where the signs say to keep off! " she said to the guards.

This was quite true. Margherita has a weakness for sitting on the grass of the little park in front of our house, and I've often spoken to her about it. But I said nothing, and for lack of witnesses, the guards let us go.

★ ★ ★

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD

PRIZE-WINNERS OF CROSSWORD NO. 8.

We are pleased to announce the three winners of Argosy's eighth Prize Crossword Competition :—

Miss F. Judson, Ozendyke, Watlington, Oxon.

Miss J. Kennedy, Blakiston Street, Fleetwood, Lancs.

D. Fergie-Woods, Esq., The College, Middlesex Hospital, London, W.1.

These readers, who sent in the first correct solutions to be checked on the closing date, each receive a one-guinea book token.

SOLUTION

Across. 1, *Merrie England.* 10, *Antenna.* 11, *Thunder.* 12, *Miami.* 14, *Press-gang.* 15, *Arch-fiend.* 16, *Edged.* 18, *Tessa.* 19, *Brick-bats.* 21, *Stormcock.* 23, *Rider:* 25, *Inhabit.* 26, *Paddles.* 28, *Friend at court.*

Down. 2, *Entrances.* 3, *Run.* 4, *Example.* 5, *Not dead.* 6, *Loudspeaker.* 7, *Nedda.* 8, *Palm.* 9, *Brigades.* 13, *Inflammable.* 15, *Artistic.* 17, *Glandular.* 19, *Blotted.* 20, *Inkspot.* 22, *Other.* 24, *Rose.* 27, *Duo.*

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 11.

Prize Crossword No. 11 will be found on page 144. For rules of entry, please see page 107.

THE PRINCESS WHO COULDN'T SAY YES

They heard a ring of laughter and the movement of light feet

by MARK VAN DOREN

"NO," said the Princess, "no!"

It was natural for the Princess to say no. She had been doing it all her life. Her father, when she was a child no bigger than the hassock on which he rested his royal feet, thought she did it prettily. He encouraged her to do it again and again, and the nursemaids did not protest. The Queen would have protested, but she was no longer among the living. Her life had ended when the child's began.

The King had never known how much he missed her until now. For he was tired of hearing the Princess say no, and he realized that the Queen would long ago have got her out of the habit.

"I tell you, daughter," he said once more, hoping against hope that it was the last time he would need to say it, "this Prince who is coming is not to be insulted or ignored. I desire that you receive him with the courtesy due his character and station. I do not prophesy that he will ask you for your hand, but if he does, and you say—if you accept him—I shall be happier than any man in my dominions. Except the Prince, of course."

The Princess turned away to stroke the glossy feathers of a raven that had hopped awkwardly onto the table by her side. The ladies-in-waiting looked at one another and wished the King would go. There was no further use in his staying. When the Princess started petting one of her beasts it was a sure sign she had forgotten people.

It was only to people that she said no. To birds, dogs, and cats, to lizards and gazelles, to salamanders and horses, she was the most indulgent creature in the world. Her chambers fluttered and thronged with those of them that could be accommodated there; and she had beaten a path to the stables and enclosures where the others lived.

"No, Dagmar, no," she whispered to the raven so that her father could hear. Dagmar knew she did not mean him, and croaked comfortably under the touch of her pretty white hand.

Then he cocked an eye at the King, advising him to retire; which the King did, between rows of ladies-in-waiting who knelt with their faces to the floor.

Helena, who was first among them, approached the Princess and curtsied.

"Has Your Highness any further wish?"

"No!" and the Princess stamped her foot. "Need I tell you again that I never wish? It is absurd to be surrounded by all of you as I am. You know it is not for me that you are here. It is for my father, who thinks I should have company. But I have company." Dagmar nodded and stretched his neck, and the ladies departed.

The Prince was to arrive next day, exactly at noon. His name was Peter, and his father, who ruled the great country of pines to the north, was the King's oldest friend. When the King had been there on a visit of state last summer he had seen the Prince and found him handsome. Always before, he had thought of him as one not to be compared with his father. But now, not so; and therefore he had invited him to come on this day of early spring and remain as long as he cared to. He had not mentioned his daughter, the Princess who never looked at a man, but this had not been necessary. The Prince had smiled and said: "Your Majesty, I will come."

Now he was coming, and the royal household turned itself inside out to prepare things that would please him. The adjacent country was ransacked for delicacies to eat. The forests were stocked with birds that a prince might consider worthy of being hunted. The choicest coverlets were procured for the bed to which he would repair after long evenings of music and wine.

The morning was fair. The sun shone happily on the crimson carpet that ran all the way from the high castle door to the pavement where the Prince would dismount from his black horse with the golden bridle rings that King Harcourt had sent as a present befitting the occasion.

At ten minutes to noon the entire household of Harcourt stood at attention before the doors behind which the King himself stood nervously, awaiting the word that his guest had arrived. Then he was to come forth and make a speech of welcome—composed by the best poet in his halls, and memorized last night—to the accompaniment of harps and lutes.

When the sun was directly overhead a sigh of surprise swept over the waiting multitude—a sigh so loud that the King heard it and asked his steward to report its cause.

The steward lifted a small window and looked out.

"Sire!" he said. "It is not as Your Majesty has planned."

"What is this? What was planned? How dare you—"

But he went to the window himself, thrusting the steward aside, and saw a pony with burs in its mane, tossing its head rudely as a countryman descended and started up the steps over which the carpet had been laid.

"Who is that?" thundered the King.

Then he knew it was Prince Peter. A ragged cap was set carelessly on the corner of his handsome head, and his short clothes were stuck everywhere with thistledown and straw. But it was Prince Peter.

The King's own hands opened the bronze doors beyond which the ladies and gentlemen of his court stood in their finest silks.

"Your Majesty!" The Prince bowed, flourishing his cap with one hand while with the other he signalled to the grooms that his pony was not to be led away.

"If Your Majesty will permit," he said, smiling as he stood erect again, "I must attend first to the good friend who brought me here." Without awaiting permission, he jumped onto the pony's back and cantered to the stables whose peaked roofs were visible above flowering shrubs and trees. His heels dug the sides of the small beast, and the cap bounced on his head.

The ladies and gentlemen who had assembled to receive a king's son-in-law, if son-in-law he was to be, could no longer refrain from glancing at their ruler's face. But it was so white that they glanced away again, and without being ordered to do so they dispersed to their various apartments, whispering and chattering as they went.

When the Prince returned he found the approaches to the palace barren of folk. But the doors stood open, so he skipped through and inquired of the first person he met, a footman in gold and scarlet who was fanning himself in the foyer.

"Where is the King?" demanded Peter.

"Not to be seen, Your Highness—forgive me, but not to be seen." The footman retreated a few steps, as from a serpent who might strike at his powdered pumps.

"Nonsense!" said the Prince. "Where is His Majesty?"

And when the footman pointed helplessly to a flight of marble stairs, the Prince ran up them three at a time.

He knew where he wanted to go when he saw a cluster of gentlemen putting eager questions to the Court Physician, a bearded sage in moss-green robes who bent his head among them. They stood at the entrance to what must be the King's private rooms, for door after door was decorated with a crown of

juniper leaves, worked there in gold. The Prince skipped between the gentlemen as if they were not there, and indeed they were not there, for they had fallen back on both sides.

In the fourth room the King lay groaning on his bed, whose embroidered counterpane a gentlewoman was endeavouring to keep in place as he tossed back and forth.

Seeing the Prince, with cap in hand, bowing gravely to the ground, he sat up suddenly and said: "You have ruined everything."

But the Prince's feelings were not hurt. "I bring you, Sire, my noble father's greetings and his unalterable love. I have similar messages for the Princess, your famed daughter. Tell me, where is she?"

When the King only glared at him in contempt and rage, he spun on his heels and disappeared, saying over his shoulder: "But I was thoughtless. Your Majesty does not care to speak. I shall find her myself."

The King put out a hand, but the Prince was already gone, and now the gentlewoman heard his light feet running in the halls.

"Where is the Princess?" he stopped a chambermaid at the far end of the remotest corridor and asked impatiently, yet with a smile too that paid its tribute to the beauty of the maid.

She blushed and shook her head.

"Her Highness is a prisoner, then?"

The Prince frowned, pretending not to understand why the maid refused to tell him.

Just then, on his right, through a thick door out of which a great key protruded as a sort of handle, he heard the singing of birds and the deep bay of a single hound.

"Ah!" he cried. Instantly his hand was upon the key. The chambermaid ran, breathless, down the corridor, determined not to be a witness of what must follow.

When Peter entered, there was quiet at first. All the birds in the cages, large and small, and those that were free to fly and perch where they pleased about the apartment of the Princess ceased singing and looked at him.

Even the hound was no longer to be heard. But there he was, a crook-kneed fellow with sad eyes, and long ears that swept the floor, making his slow way over to where in a deep casement the Princess stood, staring down at the place where Peter had first appeared on his pony, and where the sigh had run like wind among the golden grain of her father's household.

No one then had looked up to see if she stood there. But there she had stood; and she had never changed her position.

Perhaps she expected the Prince to become visible again on the crimson carpet where sunshine bloomed so lavishly.

But now the silence of her companions in the chamber was apparent, even to her. Also, the low-legged hound had thrust his cool nose into her hand. She turned, and the Prince bowed.

"Tell me, if you will," he said, "daughter of my father's oldest friend, whether it is true that human company is unwelcome here."

She studied every stitch of his homespun, but not as if she hated it, before she dropped her eyes to the cap in his hand and said with an effort: "Yes."

"Then I shall be welcome." He beamed and bowed again. "For I have been inhuman to your father. He lies groaning on his bed, and nothing can comfort him, because I have come without the ceremony he deemed necessary to this day. Do you detect the trickery in my words?"

Against her will she smiled, and once more, as if her voice were dry, she answered, "Yes."

"Good! Then we shall get on well together. That hound—is not his name Cadmus?"

"Yes." She was surprised into saying it, for she had thought the name was a secret between herself and the brindled beast who now flapped his long ears and gazed mournfully at Peter.

"I have heard of him." The Prince smiled. "Is he not one of the French breed, rare even in Louis's kingdom, whose voices are like bells, deep brazen bells, and whose bodies are slung low to the ground so that as they pursue the scent they are like shadows moving on the forest floor? Merciless at the kill, yet matchless in affection when they return at sunset with their master, their mistress, and lie in a corner of the hall, dreaming strange, harmless dreams?"

The eyes of the Princess, widening, went from the speaker to that of which he spoke—old Cadmus, who seemed to understand, for his ears drooped in pleasure. More remarkable still, he swung his forequarters about and paced clumsily towards the Prince, into whose waiting hand he pushed his nose.

"Yes!" exclaimed the Princess. "That is the kind my Cadmus is. But how did you know? There is no other like him out of France."

"Oh, but there is! I have Theseus at home. He sleeps in my room, and wakes me every morning with sweet howls. Perhaps Your Highness would delight in seeing him some day."

There was no answer to this. The Princess had turned and was looking down through the casement again.

"Or shall we dispense with 'Your Highness,' 'My Highness,' and all that? Is it as wearisome to you as—"

"Yes," she said quietly, still looking down at the spot where he had dismounted.

"You saw my pony?" he asked.

To say yes was to say that she had seen *him*. But she said it: "Yes."

"And I saw yours when I led him to the stable. Yours was in the next stall, and the sleekness of his coat was enough to shame the pair of us—Jasper and me. The name of yours? I thought the groom said Jumper."

She nodded.

"Jasper and Jumper. They are already good friends, although the ribbons in Jumper's mane seem curious beside my little fellow's burs and thistle-fluff. They should look alike while I am here. What shall I tell the groom? To polish Jasper till he shines? But Jasper grows impatient then. Or to neglect his friend a while, and leave him as he is when he comes home from the long ride you and I shall take? We can go where burs fly in abundance. Tell me, will you ride in thick woods with Jasper and me? He is sure-footed, and can follow wherever you lead. I would let you lead. You are learned in all the thickets and brakes about here—are you not?"

A door opened and Helena came in, curtseying as she endeavoured not to recognize the presence of a second person, even the Prince, in these apartments where only ravens and hounds were welcome. Dagmar, from his distant perch on the table where the Princess had left him, rolled his head at Helena as at an intrusion.

"Your Highness," began Helena. The Princess fidgeted. "His Majesty the King inquires—"

"Begone!" said the Princess sharply. "And keep those others away whose insipid faces I see huddled beyond the door. I am not home today. I am riding Jumper until sunset. Wait!" For Helena was backing out. "There is one thing you can do. Bring me at once the doublet and hose I wore at my father's masquerade last autumn. If it is dusty and wrinkled, I prefer it so. Do not dare to brush it. Bring it at once."

The Prince strolled over to Dagmar, who turned a red eye up at him and when he came closer bubbled comically in his throat.

"I have only a crow," he said. Helena had left the room. "Ravens are huge things. Are they better friends? But no man could have a better friend than my Corvo, whom I brought up from a fledgeling, and who talks. Ravens, you think, are better still? This one, I do admit, is wonderful."

When she did not answer him he looked back and saw her eyes fixed eagerly upon him. But it was not of crows and ravens she was thinking. She wanted him to be glad they were riding as he wished. She wanted him to say something about the doublet and hose.

"I heard your command," he said. "Good! We shall ride fast, in rough places. And I hope we may come home at sunset with bears' appetites for a king's dinner. As for luncheon, I loathe it. A crust and a joint of chicken in my pocket here"—he slapped his side—"should be sufficient for us both. And we can drink from the streams. I am happy that you are to be well dressed. The court will not think so, but I do."

She smiled to herself, thinking with scorn of the great table that waited in the hall with midday viands on it, smoking and smelling to the painted rafters.

"We must leave secretly," she said, "through that narrow door." She pointed between two columns on the capitals of which a pair of diminutive golden birds were sitting with their eyes half closed. "When Helena comes, you should be gone, so I may dress. Now!" For the other door was opening.

The Prince waited in a low passage where cats prowled. They were not admitted, naturally, to the chamber of big and little birds. But they were comfortable here. There were many warm ledges to lie on, and one of them, black all over except for white tips on his feet and tail, and a snowy heart-shaped shield on his breast, came with arched back to rub the Prince's legs.

Then the passage was completely beautiful with her presence. She looked like a boy and yet was not a boy. Her cheeks burned, and a cap sat on one corner of her hair, matching the cap that the Prince now set jauntily on his.

They were out of the castle, and had slipped unseen to the stables, before Helena knew that her mistress was finished with the doublet and hose. The Princess had banished her to the corridor while she dressed. When she returned, finding the apartment empty except for restless birds and beasts, she ran away, crying for the Chamberlain. She must warn the court. Too much had happened that she could never explain. And the luncheon must be eaten without its guest of honour in his chair. She all but fainted as she ran.

Deep silence fell on the court when her announcement was made. In every apartment, every connecting hall, voices dwindled until only whispering was heard. But it was heard everywhere, as if bees swarmed in each cranny and coign of ancient Harcourt.

The King sent for Helena, and at first rebuked her for the news she brought. But the injustice of this was clear, and he dismissed her with only a low groan to show how miserable he was.

Then he fell asleep, and the castle slept with him—or seemed to sleep, for only the whispering went on, all afternoon until the sun was low over the larches that graced the western grounds.

The sun dropped lower still. Shadows fell on the upper windows where the King slept.

They reminded him as he awoke of the darkness into which his plans had fallen, so that he started up from his bed in despair, calling the wisest of his counsellors about him. He would ask them how he should write his friend in the north, explaining and if possible excusing the failure of this day.

But no sooner were the counsellors gathered about his bed than they trembled, hearing as the King did a sudden ring of laughter from the hall, and the movement of light feet, skipping in unison, nearer and nearer the door.

"Father!" The word sounded like a chime of silver bells shaking their melody over all the room. And the Princess stood in the entrance, her hand in Peter's hand. He had spoken also. The chime was their chime, harmonious, clear beyond dispute.

"Your Majesty! Sire! My father's friend! What other ceremonies shall I use? For I will say anything, now that Her Highness has said—what is it, dearest one, that you have said? I would hear it only from your lips."

The King leapt to his feet before the nearest groom could clothe them in their slippers. "What is it, daughter? What poor thing have you said? For it must be poor, and it may be disgraceful, if so disobedient a child as you have spoken."

Yet he thundered gently, hoping against hope that at last he was to hear—

The Princess straightened and stood still, so that Peter feared for a moment the word was lost. He bowed reproachfully to the King, saying: "Sire, if I may say so, this lady must be honoured with your truest trust. She is worthy of silence while she prepares her throat for the utterance I have asked. Meanwhile, may I report that from the first instant of my seeing her today she has used no other word than that which you will hear. To every question I have laid at her feet there has been but one reply. And in the thicket where Your Majesty's hounds last summer lost the scent of Bilbo, the great stag, she made the same reply when with reverence and love I put the question of all questions. Your Majesty may guess what it was. But now Your Majesty will hear what she said. My fondest, faithfullest, merriest friend"—he turned to the Princess—"your father is

waiting. I am waiting." The Princess looked only at Peter as she clapped her hands, laughed prettily, and answered: "Yes."

The counsellors grew pale with wonder, but the King trembled with both wonder and delight as he approached the kneeling pair to bless them. "Stand up, children," he said at last, "and tell me how this could be. What magic, Peter, did you use?"

The Prince laughed. "No magic, Sire. I asked her only what I knew she thought was true."

King Harcourt wagged his head benignly. "But when you will *not* know? In days to come—what then, my confident boy?"

The Prince laughed again. "Those streams will be crossed when they are come to, in the glades and forests of our future. But now, my father's friend, is it your wish that we suitably attire ourselves for dinner? We are willing, and I for one have all manner of gear secreted in twelve saddle-bags which six horses bore after me to a corner of these grounds. They are waiting to be brought up. And my lady is not averse—"

King Harcourt clapped his hands until the household started with the sound.

"The dinner! Let it be when I had planned! And double the complement of musicians who will attend. This is the evening of my daughter's betrothal. All who hear me, instantly obey!"

The crowd scattered, and the royal three, after kissing one another's hands, departed to their several tiring-rooms.

* * *

ANSWERS to QUESTION TIME on page 50

1. *John Worthing to Gwendolen Fairfax, in "The Importance of Being Earnest," by Oscar Wilde.*
2. *The author to the reader, in "The Story of Ferdinand," by Munro Leaf.*
3. *Mr. and Mrs. Canary to Mr. Quangle Wangle, in "The Quangle Wangle's Hat," by Edward Lear.*
4. *Hamlet to Polonius, in "Hamlet," by William Shakespeare.*
5. *Alice to herself, in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," by Lewis Carroll.*
6. *"I" to the tomtit, in the song, "The Suicide's Grave," from "The Mikado," by W. S. Gilbert.*
7. *Mr. Barkis to David, in "David Copperfield," by Charles Dickens.*
8. *Sir Pitt Crawley to Becky, in "Vanity Fair," by W. M. Thackeray.*

MIXED BLESSINGS

Children reflect constant cares, but uncertain comforts

RICHARD BRAITHWAITE

" I have a notion," said Lucy, " you think the little Middletons too much indulged. Perhaps they may be the outside of enough; but it is so natural in Lady Middleton; and for my part I love to see children full of life and spirits; I cannot bear them if they are tame and quiet."

" I confess," replied Elinor, " that while I am at Barton Park I never think of tame and quiet children with abhorrence."

JANE AUSTEN, *Sense and Sensibility*

Decadence

What would your Great-Grandfather, who
Was Aide-de-Camp to General Brue,
And lost a leg at Waterloo,
And Quatre Bras and Ligny too!
And died at Trafalgar!
What would he have remarked to hear
His Young Descendant shriek with fear,
Because he happened to be near
A Harmless Motor-Car!

HILAIRE BELLOC, *Cautionary Tales*

Little Victims

" These, young ladies," said Mrs. Pardiggle, " are my five boys . . . Egbert, my eldest (twelve), is the boy who sent out his pocket-money, to the amount of five-and-threepence, to the Tockahoopo Indians. Oswald, my second (ten-and-a-half), is the child who contributed two-and-ninepence to the Great National Smithers Testimonial. Francis, my third (nine), one-and-sixpence-halfpenny; Felix, my fourth (seven), eightpence to the Superannuated Widows; Alfred, my youngest (five), has voluntarily enrolled himself in the Infant Bonds of Joy, and is pledged never, through life, to use tobacco in any form."

We had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were weazened and shrivelled—though they were certainly that too—but they looked absolutely ferocious

with discontent. At the mention of the Tockahoopo Indians, I could really have supposed Egbert to be one of the most baleful members of that tribe, he gave us such a savage frown. The face of each child, as the amount of his contribution was mentioned, darkened in a peculiarly vindictive manner, but his was by far the worst. I must except, however, the little recruit into the Infant Bonds of Joy, who was solidly and evenly miserable.

CHARLES DICKENS, *Bleak House*

The Conventionalist

Fourteen-year-old, why must you giggle and dote,
Fourteen-year-old, why are you such a goat?
I'm fourteen years old, that is the reason,
I giggle and dote in season.

STEVIE SMITH

At the Helm

"Youth," said The Other, "should suggest innocence."

"But never act on the suggestion. I don't believe the two ever really go together. People talk vaguely about the innocence of a little child, but they take mighty good care not to let it out of their sight for twenty minutes. The watched pot never boils over. I knew a boy once who really was innocent . . . He believed in company prospectuses, and in the purity of elections, and in women marrying for love, and even in a system of winning at roulette. He never quite lost his faith in it, but he dropped more money than his employers could afford to lose."

SAKI, *Reginald*

Crystal Clear

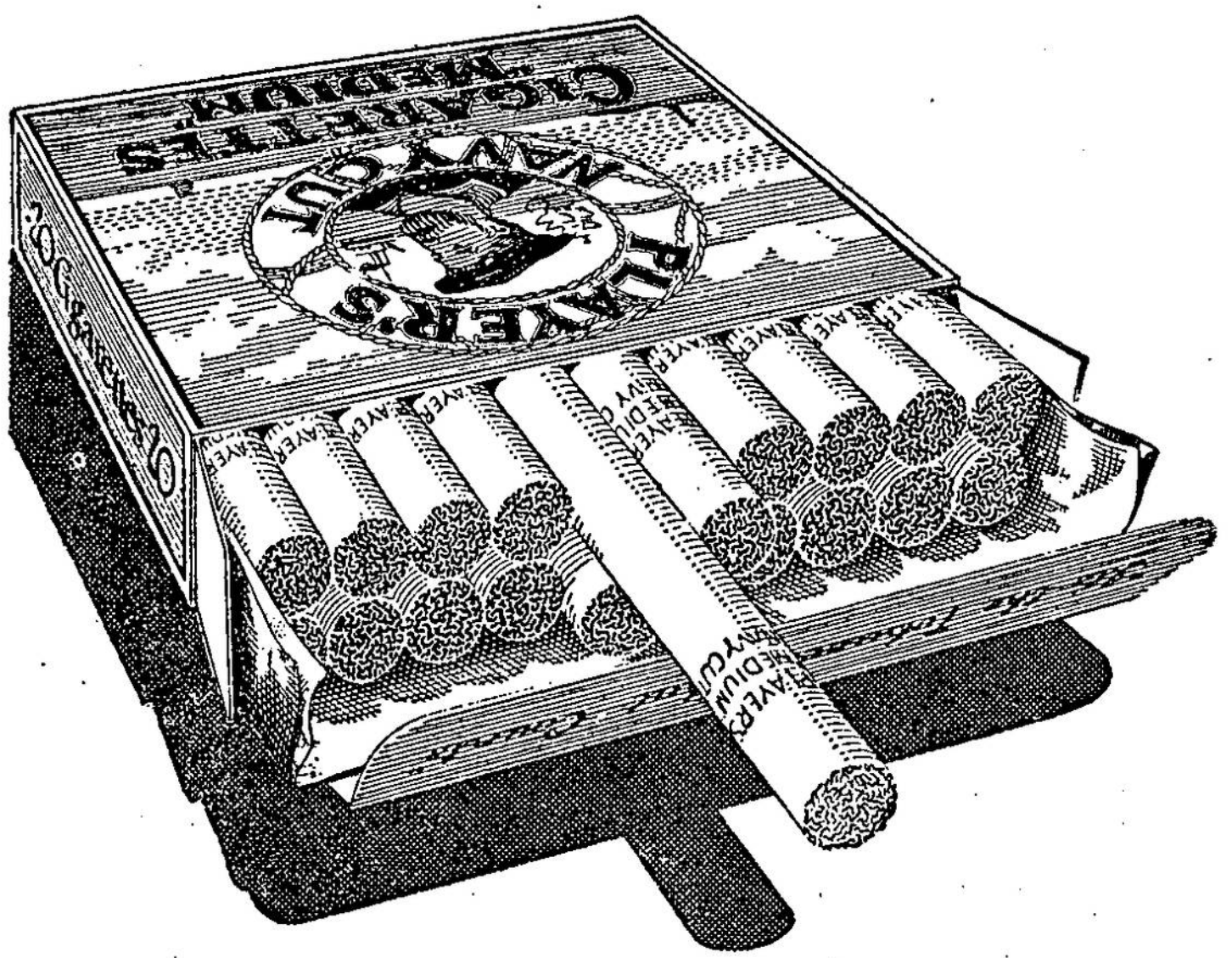
Elaine, pretending it was salt,
Mixed powdered glass in Grandma's malt.
Her father cried, "O child abhorred!"—
She'd used his cherished Waterford.

E. AITKEN, *A Ruthless Rhyme*

Us, Too

But I don't *want* to be as good and wise as Tom Macaulay.

SIR JAMES FITZJAMES STEPHEN,
aged four



Player's Please Everyone

[NCC 848]

ONE KIND OF WOMAN

I had scarcely lighted the lamp when he came in, his black hair wet with dew

by JEAN LESLIE

THE house is full of hate. You have only to step inside the big doors to feel it, like fog, in your face. No one comes here who does not have to come—the parish priest or a neighbour with a cow to sell—and even these are aware of the hate and leave quickly. It is not seen in anything the ladies do, or heard in the words they speak, but it is there and one cannot escape it any more than one can escape the odour of mildew in rotting walls.

When I first came to live with the Trevelyans I was only a bit of a girl, brought down from the hills by my father because there were more mouths at home than his few acres would feed. That was more than twenty years ago and Mr. Richard was alive and the three of them were happy together in the big house on Bitter Root Hill. My father was fortunate, the townspeople said, to be able to place me so well, because the Trevelyans were kind people, and wealthy, according to the standards of our county and the times.

I do not recall whether or not I missed my parents, my brothers, and my sisters; but I think it unlikely, because here there was always food enough, and a warm house, and good dresses of pretty fabrics. I know that I was quick to learn the ways of these people because although the Trevelyans had two other little serving-maids older and prettier than I, I was always their favourite. From the beginning I was singled out and trained to serve the family.

Miss Abbie was a tall stern woman, with grey hair and a deep voice. It was she who managed the great farms and directed the many servants. She was pleased because I was an apt pupil and so she taught me to read and write and count, in order that I would be able to help her to keep the big ledgers in which she set down the sums paid for crops and animals.

Miss Sue Ellen was younger and softer; a slender woman with faded hair and large eyes. When guests came, it was Miss Sue Ellen who received them and poured tea and talked of books and music and the far places she had visited with her father.

It was Miss Sue Ellen who made me a good needlewoman and taught me to play the spinet that stood in the big drawing-room. It was Miss Sue Ellen, too, who gave me silks from the chest in her bedroom and taught me to fashion them into dresses; and taught me how to brush my hair until it shone and how to twine ribbons in the braids.

When I had finished she would call Miss Abbie to see me, and they would kiss me and call me their pretty darling. Miss Sue Ellen was a gentle woman, full of happiness, and her hands were soft and white and seemed to have no bones in them. She always smelled of lavender, which she kept in little sachets among her fine undergarments.

Mr. Richard, their brother, was the youngest of the three. When I came to live with them he was about the age of my father, who was nearly forty. He was a big man with curly black hair and a voice that filled the house. His face was flushed from much eating and drinking and he was always in high spirits, except on those mornings after he had been to Churchill Street when his head ached and his hands trembled.

Miss Abbie and Miss Sue Ellen worshipped their brother. He was their sun and moon, their lodestar, the divinity for whom their days—and the days of us who worked in the house—were ordered. The world of Bitter Root Hill revolved around his pleasure. For his part, he was fond of them, I think, and grateful for the comforts they provided; but I do not recall that I ever saw him lift his hand to help Miss Abbie, or do anything more for Miss Sue Ellen than to recover a ball of wool she had dropped. It was not that Mr. Richard was unkind, but only that he had been made selfish by too much love.

Even his faults were dear to them. They chided him for drinking too much of the Irish whisky which he kept on the table, for losing too heavily at cards, and for being seen about the town with the gay, overdressed ladies from Churchill Street, but they made no move to stop him. The bottle was replaced when it was empty, the debts were paid, and the bold women were blamed for having led Mr. Richard astray.

Mr. Richard was always very kind to me. When I first came down from the hills he would hold me on his knee and tease me. He liked to make me talk so that he could laugh at my strange speech. At table he would brandish his knife and threaten to cut off my thick braids to make a halter for his mare. Sometimes he would tickle my neck with his big black moustache and I would smell the sharp heady odour of the whisky he drank.

But as I grew older all this was changed. Miss Abbie taught me to be quiet, to speak when I was spoken to, and to sit properly. Miss Sue Ellen made my dresses long enough to cover my legs and put my hair up in a great crown laced with ribbons. I became a woman. Mr. Richard did not tease me any more. He seldom spoke to me at all, but sometimes I would find him watching me in a curious way as though he could not believe that this was the little hoyden they had taken from the hill country; and sometimes when I chanced to touch him he would flinch as though he had been burnt.

When I was young I did not trouble myself about the relationship that existed between the ladies and their brother, but as I grew older I saw that they were jealous of his affections and that he often made use of this for his own ends. If Miss Abbie berated him for his extravagances he had but to mention it to Miss Sue Ellen and she would give him bank notes to pay his debts. If Miss Sue Ellen embroidered one of the fine linen handkerchiefs he fancied, he had only to show it to Miss Abbie and she would purchase him a costly scarf. When Miss Sue Ellen learned of the scarf she would straightway quilt him a handsome smoking-jacket.

Another thing I noticed was that Mr. Richard did no task, however simple. Reared as I had been in bitter penury, I could not understand how a man could live his life in idleness, and being now on intimate terms with my ladies, I made bold to say as much. Miss Abbie explained to me that a gentleman of wealth and position had no duty beyond the proper management of his estate and the bearing of sons to carry on his name. Being young and brash, I said that I could not see that Mr. Richard was performing either of these duties. Miss Abbie rebuked me, but Miss Sue Ellen laughed and called me a wise and observant child.

"Father's estate was divided equally between us," she said, "and for my part, I had far rather have Abbie manage my share than Richard! Richard is still young and wild. There will be time enough for him to take over the management of the farms when he is older."

I thought it strange for them to speak of Mr. Richard as young when my father was no older and already had many children and was growing bent from tilling his small farm. "Perhaps Mr. Richard will settle down when he is married and has sons," I suggested.

The ladies looked at me oddly. "Yes," they said. "When he is married." And then they sighed.

In later years I knew why Mr. Richard did not have sons

to carry on his name. It was because he did not like the kind of women who were fit to become his wife and mother of his children. When Miss Abbie and Miss Sue Ellen invited young ladies to the house on Bitter Root Hill, Mr. Richard would stare at them in a bold way and make remarks that brought blushes to their cheeks and tears of vexation to my ladies' eyes, and then he would stride out and saddle his mare and ride off to Churchill Street. Sometimes he would be gone for days, and then Miss Abbie and Miss Sue Ellen would sit together in Miss Sue Ellen's sitting-room and talk in low voices, and sometimes weep.

But all that was long ago, and everything has changed. No young ladies are bidden to tea and no one rides Mr. Richard's black mare but I. For Mr. Richard is dead long since and the house is full of hate. It creeps along the still halls and hides in dark corners.

He died on a hot summer's night when the moon was full and the mist lay heavy on the meadow. I was in my room when I heard Miss Abbie cry out. I remember that it was a hoarse cry, such as a man in pain would make, and loud, because she was directly beneath me.

With my robe flung over my shoulders I ran along the hall and down the wide front stairs and through the big rooms where the furniture stood pale and clean in summer loose covers, and came at last to the kitchen where Miss Abbie and Miss Sue Ellen stood. Mr. Richard lay on the floor with his rifle beside him and there was blood welling from his chest.

"My brother is dying," Miss Abbie said stiffly. "Send for Doctor La Grande."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and I spread the cloth from the table over my poor master and went outside and ran to the building where the menservants slept. "Mr. Richard is dying!" I cried. "Go quickly for Doctor La Grande and tell him your master has shot himself!"

Doctor La Grande came, but of course there was nothing he could do. "I cannot believe that Richard would take his own life," he kept saying. "It is not like Richard to do such a thing!" His eyes searched our faces, trying to read what lay behind the pallor and the tears. "Where were you, Abbie," he said slowly, "when this happened?"

Miss Abbie's head went up as the mare's does when she is curbed. "What are you suggesting, Antoine?" she asked.

"I am suggesting nothing, Abbie. These are questions I must ask."

"Of course. I beg your pardon. I was in the office," Miss

Abbie said in a low voice. "I was working on the books. There is much business connected with the farms."

"Thank you. And you, Sue Ellen?"

"I was in my sitting-room, Antoine. I—I was knitting slippers for Richard." She covered her face with her hands and began to weep in a lost, lonely way.

"And you, my dear?"

"The child was upstairs in her room," Miss Abbie said. "I heard her run along the hall after I cried out."

"Only then? You did not hear the shot?" Doctor La Grande asked me.

"Yes, sir. But I supposed it was outside. I thought Mr. Richard was shooting at a possum."

"She is a pretty child," the doctor said thoughtfully. "Richard must have thought her a very pleasing wench."

"Whatever Richard's faults, he did not seduce servant girls," Miss Abbie said sharply. "Besides, the little maid is young and as virtuous as your own nieces. If you have any suspicions you may dismiss them."

"She was in her room," Miss Sue Ellen added. "My door stood open and had she come downstairs I should have heard her pass my room."

The doctor sighed and drew the table-cloth over Mr. Richard's face. "He is dead," he said, "of a bullet wound. But how he died—or why—we shall never know. We shall have to say that it was an accident," he added. "Perhaps it was. Perhaps he stumbled and discharged it accidentally. Let us hope so."

"What difference does it make?" Miss Sue Ellen cried passionately. "He is dead! Richard is *dead*!"

"The last of the Trevelyans," Miss Abbie said heavily. "The last of the line. There is no one left now but two lonely old women alone in a lonely house."

"Oh, no, Miss Abbie!" I sobbed. "You're not alone! You'll never be alone!" I threw my arms around her neck and buried my face against her breast. "I'll never leave you," I promised. "Not as long as you live!"

"Dear, faithful child! How much it means to us now to have your love." Her arms closed around me and I felt hot tears dropping on my face. I was glad that she could weep.

The days that followed were filled with a terrible sadness. We listened for Mr. Richard's great laugh, but the only sound we heard was our own sighing. And over the emptiness that his passing had caused was the black cloud of doubt, for no one believed that he had killed himself.

When the tradespeople came to the door they looked at the ladies curiously so that one knew they were speculating as to the manner of Mr. Richard's death. Even our servants whispered behind closed doors and proud old Delia, who had cooked for the Trevelyans for forty years, went home to the hills to live with her grandson. The others—those fine ladies and gentlemen who had been eager to bring their daughters to tea—these did not come to call, but sent their servants with condolences and bouquets that were poisoned by suspicion. Banker Lee came once, and Lawyer Petard, because duty brought them; but Doctor La Grande was the only one who came as a friend.

Often after Mr. Richard died the doctor would come in for a cup of tea or a glass of the Amontillado Miss Abbie kept for him. Sometimes he brought sweets which his nieces had made, or flowers from his garden, or a bottle of cordial. Sometimes the ladies were resting and the doctor and I would sit alone in the grand drawing-room drinking tea from fine china cups, for since Mr. Richard's death another maid answered the door and I was instructed to receive in place of Miss Sue Ellen as though I were one of the family.

One day the doctor followed me to the wine cellar where I had gone for sherry. "This is a sad house now," he said. "It is no proper place for a pretty young thing, my dear." He leaned close and I could smell the fine French wines he had at table. "My niece," he said, "would welcome a nicely trained companion. You could help her with the children and the mending. Perhaps I could teach you to assist me in the dispensary. Would you like that, *ma petite*?"

I chose a bottle from the bin and lifted it carefully. "I could not leave the ladies, sir," I answered. I looked at him gravely over the dusty bottle. "You heard me promise Miss Abbie that I would never leave them, for they have no one now but me."

The doctor cupped my chin in his thin cold hand. "It is as Miss Abbie said," he sighed. "You are a virtuous maid."

After that he did not come to call unless one of the ladies was ill and I sent for him.

And what I had told him was true: Miss Abbie and Miss Sue Ellen had no one but me. They did not even have each other because the small fire of suspicion had been kindled by Doctor La Grande and fanned by the whispering of the townspeople and the servants. Each kept to her own room or sat silent at table, and when they talked it was only to me.

In those first weeks after Mr. Richard died, Miss Abbie spent long hours every night in her little office. In the morning I would find her pacing up and down the room and on the desk

would be spread the books in which she set down the money that was earned. "I cannot understand it!" she said to me one day. "Richard had everything to live for! He was young and happy and there was money enough for him to live as he wanted to live, even though I often told him that he spent it foolishly. He wouldn't have taken his own life! I know he wouldn't!"

"The doctor suggested that it was an accident," I reminded her. "Although I find it hard to think that anyone as experienced as Mr. Richard would have been careless with a loaded rifle." I moved the books aside and put her breakfast coffee on the desk. "Do you think it was an accident, Miss Abbie?" I asked.

"An accident? No, my dear, I do not think it was an accident." She reached forward and caught my wrist in her strong fingers. "Tell me," she said sternly, "did you see my sister come down the stairs that night. Did you *see* her?"

I pulled away from her and covered my face with my hands. "Don't ask me!" I begged. "Don't ask me, Miss Abbie!"

"Tell me, child," she ordered. "Did you *see* Sue Ellen on the stairs?"

"No, Miss Abbie," I admitted. "I came as quickly as I could but I—I saw no one. But, oh, Miss Abbie," I cried, "you mustn't think that Miss Sue Ellen would kill poor Mr. Richard! Even though she knew . . ." I stopped short and pressed my fingers to my trembling lips.

"Even though she knew—what, child?" Miss Abbie asked. "Even though she knew he loved you best," I whispered.

"Ah!" It was a little cry of pain and triumph. "She was always more indulgent than I, but still he loved me best!" Miss Abbie said. "Sue Ellen would never forgive him for that! Never!" She pressed my hands between hers. "Thank you for telling me, child. It will comfort me."

And soon Miss Sue Ellen said to me, "I cannot understand it, my dear. Sometimes I think I must be going mad! Richard would not have killed himself! He had everything to make him happy: love and youth and money to indulge his whims."

"The doctor said it was an accident," I said.

"But that is foolish, of course. Richard handled guns before he could hold a spoon. All of us did." She pulled me down beside her on the couch and placed her arm around me. "Tell me," she said, "what does Abbie do each night in that little room downstairs?"

"Why, she adds up the sums," I said innocently. "She writes figures in the big black book, Miss Sue Ellen. The money

comes in and Miss Abbie must divide it equally because there are only the two of you to share it. The sums are larger now that Mr. Richard is dead."

"I see," she said slowly. And then, more to herself than me, she said, "That will please Abbie. She is proud of her fine management."

"She is proud of having money in the bank," I said, and then I added quickly, "but you must not think that Miss Abbie killed poor Mr. Richard! I am sure she loved him dearly, even though she said that . . ."

"Said that—what, child?"

I buried my flaming face in her lap. "Forgive me!" I whispered. "I speak too freely, Miss Sue Ellen. I sometimes forget that I am a maid." She stroked my hair absently. "We all forget, my dear. We have come to think of you as though you were our own. What is it that my sister said?"

"Miss Abbie begrudged him the money he spent," I said, from the protecting folds of her skirt. "She said he was squandering his share of the estate and that when it was gone she would have to pay his debts because you would not."

"So that was it! Thank you for telling me, my dear."

Another summer came and the mist lay heavy on the meadow, and Miss Abbie paced her little room and said, "I know she killed him but I cannot prove it. She is a vain, possessive woman. You must be careful, child, or she will try to take you from me as she took Richard."

"Yes, ma'am. I understand."

And Miss Sue Ellen cowered in her sitting-room and said, "I am afraid, my dear. Some day she will kill me as she killed Richard, because she wants my share of the money, too. You must never leave me. Promise you will never leave me!" She put out her poor thin hand and clasped my wrist. "You shall have the money if you stay," she whispered. "Promise that you will stay!"

And I answered, "I have never asked for anything, Miss Sue Ellen. I shall stay because I love you."

Many summers have come and gone, and the house is filled with hate. But the hate is not for me. The old ladies love me and vie for my favour. This is something I learnt from Mr. Richard. I have everything that I want and I am content. There is this fine warm house and good food and servants below me who do my bidding. Some day—perhaps quite soon—the ladies will die and I shall be mistress of many acres. I shall never have to be afraid that I shall be taken back into the hill

country. I shall always be dressed in silks and laces and have ribbons in my hair, and I shall never grow old and ugly and ill, bearing unwanted children.

For I have been an apt pupil. From each of the Trevelyans I learnt what I needed to know. Miss Abbie taught me to be wise in the ways of business so that some day I shall be able to manage these lands that will be mine; and Miss Sue Ellen taught me to be a gracious mistress in this fine house. Mr. Richard taught me to ride and shoot, and showed me, by example, how to get what I wanted. When I am old the people of the valley will have forgotten that I was once a poor child from the hills because I shall act like a lady and be vastly rich.

And they will call me a good woman because I have lived chastely and shall die so. When I pass the women of Churchill Street I look the other way, because they are carnal and I am virtuous. It pleases me to think that they gave Mr. Richard whatever he asked and have nothing now, while I—who gave him nothing—shall have everything. It will be mine because I would not cheapen myself as the women of the village did.

On that night so many years ago I lay in bed and thought hungrily of the cold chicken in the pantry. I was young then and I had not forgotten the poverty of the hill country. In the night I would think of the good food in the kitchen and I was ashamed of my greed, but I was hungry, too. So I had found a way of going along the balcony and down the outside stairs to the kitchen and eating until I was satisfied. There was always much food and what I took was not missed.

On that night Mr. Richard had gone to Churchill Street and so I slipped downstairs without my robe. But I had scarcely lighted the lamp when he came in from outside, his black hair wet with dew and his big rifle slung over his shoulder. He had drunk a great deal so that he swayed as he stood, and his eyes were hot and desirous when he saw me.

"I had not expected you so early," I said coldly.

"I came back because no woman of Churchill Street has the power to hold me as your indifference does," he said.

"If you will turn your back, Mr. Richard, I shall go to my room."

"I think not, my dear," he smiled. "Since chance has at last offered me a crumb from this lavish table I should be a fool not to enjoy it."

He leaned his rifle against the wall and turned up the lamp. He looked at me for a long while and then he said, softly, "So these are the charms you guard so jealously beneath your whalebone

and your ruffles! And these are the braids my sisters torture into stylish coronets!"

"Please, Mr. Richard!" I stepped back quickly and my hair fell from his fingers.

"The promise of the child was fulfilled," he nodded. "You are very beautiful, my dear. Beautiful and cruel and cunning."

"It is not cruel to be virtuous," I retorted. "Nor cunning to hold myself above the women of Churchill Street."

"The difference," he said dryly, "is a matter of price. It amuses me to think that if I offer you enough I may have what I wish, because you are not virtuous, but only cold and greedy." He reached out a hand that was moist with sweat and ran it along the thin sleeve of my nightgown. "What is the price?" he asked. "Tonight I would pay it! Is it my name? Do you wish to be mistress of Bitter Root Hill? If my name is the price, I shall pay it."

"No, Mr. Richard," I answered quietly. "I have no wish to rise above my station." For I had known always that even though he offered me the name which the young ladies of the county coveted, Miss Abbie and Miss Sue Ellen would always be the mistresses of Bitter Root Hill. And I knew, too, that Mr. Richard's share of the money would be dissipated at the gaming-tables. It was not marriage that I wanted.

"I have not offered enough?" He smiled, but his eyes were cold. "I do not know what you possess that you value so highly, my dear," he said, "but tonight I shall discover the secret. You have reminded me of your position in this house, and it is not seemly for the master to bargain for what is his for the taking."

As he stumbled round the table towards me I reached out for the rifle and levelled it at his chest. "If you come any closer," I said quietly, "I shall kill you, Mr. Richard."

He stopped with the barrel of the gun resting against his heart, and looked at me. In his eyes I saw knowledge born, and watched it grow. "My name is not enough," he said slowly. "You want all of Bitter Root Hill! You mean to destroy the three of us so that your greed may be fed! That's your crazy woman's dream! For all we've taught you to speak like a lady and dress like a lady, and for all you're quick to learn, you're tainted like all of your people. In time you'll grow daft like your mother, and her mother before her! And you'll bear daft sons and . . .!"

He made a sudden move for the rifle but my hand was steadier, and quicker.

When he fell I laid the gun beside him and ran back to my

room the way I had come. I had nothing to fear. If I were caught I would say that I had killed him in defence of my virtue, and I would tell them that I had not killed Richard who was God's child, but only the beast that was in him. I would tell them that I was meant to destroy that which is carnal.

As matters turned out I had ample time to reach my room and don my robe before Miss Abbie called. I ran along the upstairs hall and descended the wide front stairs right behind Miss Sue Ellen, and there was no need then or later to admit that I had taken cold chicken from the ice-chest.

The wind has risen tonight. It blows across the empty fields and makes the windows rattle in their casements, and I am cold in my pretty blue taffeta frock. But I shall not light the fire until Richard comes. He will admire the ribbons poor old Miss Sue Ellen has woven into my braids and he will be humbly happy to see that I am wearing the dress he likes, even though it is very old and has been turned again and again.

Richard always comes when the wind blows from the hill country. Not the evil Richard, of course, for he was the devil's own and paid for his wickedness with his life; but the good Richard who has loved me all through the years and who still hopes to make me mistress of Bitter Root Hill. Some day I shall reward him for his patience. I shall tell him that it pleases me that he no longer gambles away our money or looks desirously at the evil women of Churchill Street. Perhaps I shall tell him tonight when the flames leap high.

It is very cold and the wind tears at the house. Old Miss Abbie nods over her egg money and Miss Sue Ellen is fast asleep with the covers pulled over her head. I shall build a fire now for Richard. A big fire to guide him down from the hills.

* * *

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 11. Argosy's eleventh Prize Crossword Competition appears on page 144. There will be one-guinea book tokens for the first three correct solutions checked on the closing date. Entries should be completed *in ink*, and posted to: ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD (No. 11), 3 Pilgrim Street, London, E.C.4 (Comp.) to arrive by Thursday, April 8th, the closing date.

We regret that entry must be limited to readers living in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and Eire. There is no entry fee and the Editor's decision is final. Names of the prize-winners in this competition and the solution will appear in the issue of Argosy on sale June 10th. The solution to Prize Crossword No. 8 and the names of the prize-winners appear on page 84.

Bill Conway, a young R.A.S.C. Major in charge of war-time convoys from Ahwaz, in the Persian desert, to Russia, finds himself beset with troubles, for his fiancée, Jean, has broken off their engagement, and he has had to quell a riot among his Persian employees. As a climax, he receives a mysterious phone warning, from the Friends of Iran, to clear out of the country.

He sets out for G.H.Q. with his faithful Quashgai driver, Bezard. They come across a wrecked truck, with the naked corpse of its driver. Between the rubber pad and the metal of a pedal, Conway discovers a document. A black car was speeding away from the wreck. Later, the same car tries, unsuccessfully, to force them off a bridge. In the window Conway glimpses a sinister face, like an evil skull.

At Teheran Conway finds a room booked for him. On the dressing-table is a card: "With the compliments of the Friends of Iran." At G.H.Q. he reports to Lt.-Col. "Sandy" Mackenzie, Chief of Intelligence, and meets his lovely Polish secretary, Tania. Conway accepts Sandy's offer to work for him.

As the Second Part of the story opens, the interview continues . . .

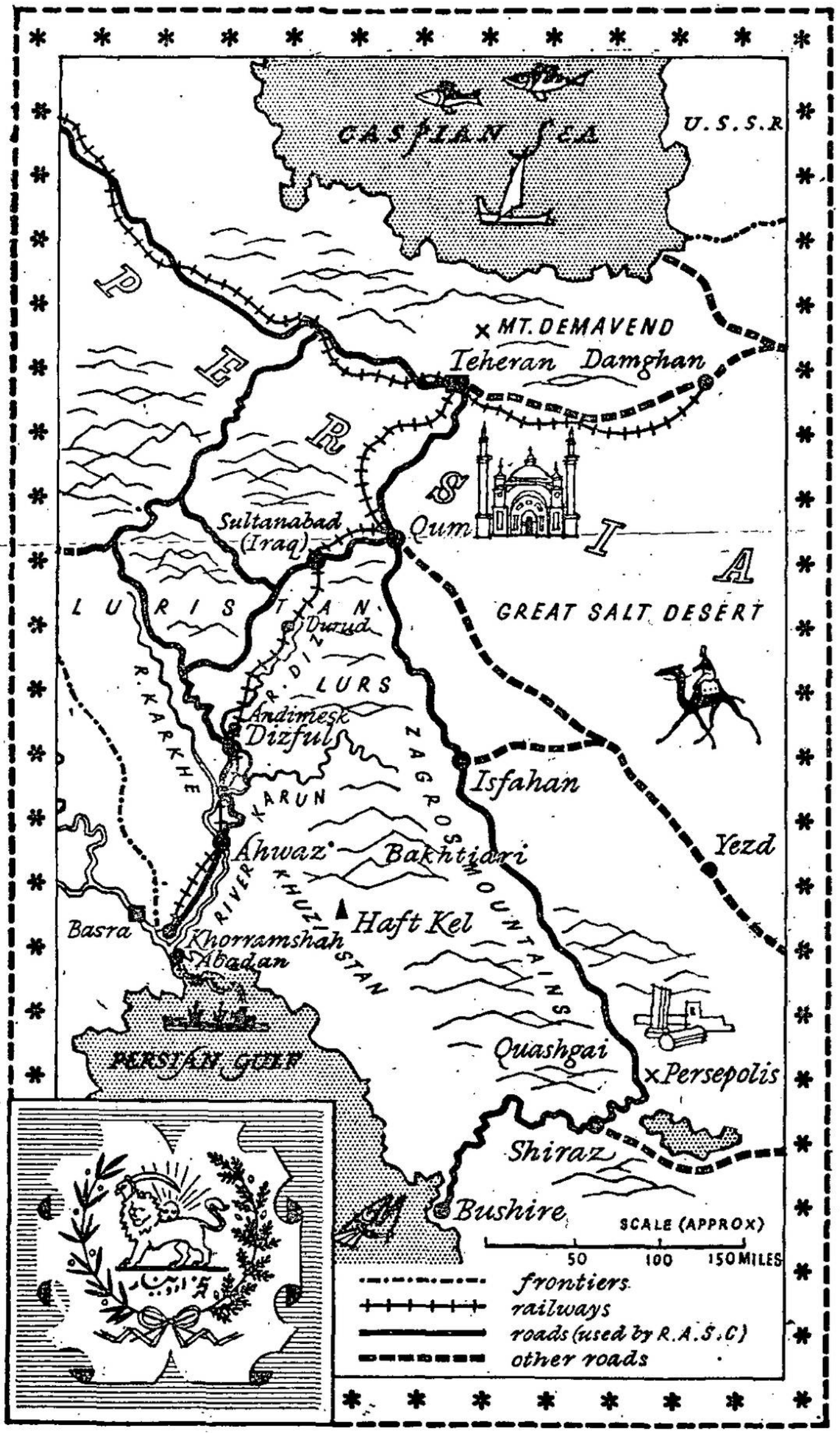
I PULLED out the stiff white card, and put it down in front of Colonel Mackenzie.

"Sandy," I said, "who are the Friends of Iran?"

He jumped to his feet, snatching at it.

"Where did you get this?" he said.

"It was waiting for me last night, when I got to the hotel; someone had thoughtfully booked a room for me."


CASPIAN SEA
U.S.S.R
PERSIA
MT. DEMAVEND
Teheran
Damghan
Qum
Sultanabad (Iraq)
LURISTAN
Durud
R. DIZ
LURS
GREAT SALT DESERT
R. KARKHE
Andimesk
Dizful
ZAGROS MOUNTAINS
Isfahan
KARUN
Ahwaz
Bakhtiari
Yezd
RIVER
KHUZISTAN
Haft Kel
Basra
Khorramshah
Abadan
PERSIAN GULF
Quashgai
Persepolis
Shiraz
Bushire
SCALE (APPROX)
50
100
150 MILES
frontiers
railways
roads (used by R.A.S.C)
other roads

He started swearing. It was not for long; but, in choice, the rich round string of medieval words could not have been bettered. He was pacing up and down very fast.

"Have you had any more of these?" he shot over his shoulder.

"No. I had a telephone call in Ahwaz. But I——"

"Tell me. The whole thing; everything that happened, exactly."

I groped my way through the story of that night. Again and again he stopped me to ask a minute detail; there was no casual interest here.

"You would recognize that voice again?" he said.

"Anywhere, as long as I live."

"Anything else happened?"

I thought.

"No, except we were nearly pushed off the bridge at Bisitun, on the way here."

"Tell me."

And off I had to go again. As I was describing the face I had seen, he came over to his desk and started drawing something on a pad; then he held it up for me to see.

"Like that?" he said.

It was a very good likeness of the face drawn under the peak of a *pahlevi*—the high-fronted Persian cap.

"That's the man," I said.

He rolled the paper into a tight ball and threw it into the basket. "I've seen him once," he said, "and I know little of him, only that he is believed now to be among the terrorists in the mountains and a thoroughly nasty bit of work." Then he shook his head. "But it doesn't tie up, any of it."

"I've heard some wonderful swearing and been asked a lot more questions; but you still haven't answered mine. Who are the Friends of Iran?"

"We just don't know. It started as one of the usual nationalist secret societies—little Persians playing bogey-bogey in the bazaar. But it has been taken over by someone who is going in for sabotage in a big way.

"A train of oil tankers—five hundred tons of high-octane stuff—went over into the river gorge two days ago. Just a bent rail on the outside of a curve, but one of those damned things"—he stabbed the white card—"was nailed on a telegraph post. They tried to cut the pipe-line at Agha Jari last week; it was bungled, but this was drawn in the sand."

He gave me what I thought was a particularly ghoulish look. "And," he said, "if your Persians had not been cowards and run away, we should probably have found one pinned to your corpse."

"But why me?"

"I expect you are getting the credit for a lot more than just breaking up riots; things people I know have done."

He went back to his original train of thought.

"The central organization is too good to be Persian, though

they use them for the spade-work. Find the nerve-centre and we can scotch the lot. They might even be . . ."

He let the end of the sentence hang. There was a banging on the outer door; the office staff had returned.

"Let them in," he said, "and turn that tap off."

When I got back, he was standing staring out of the window, the white card in his hand.

"Did you say you were staying at the Demavand?"

"Yes."

"I don't think they will bother you—actively—there. But don't go beyond the lighted streets after dark. You had better keep your card. I'm a member too. They send me one of those about once a week. They don't want me in Iran, either."

He was fiddling with his pipe again, turning it over and over, looking in the bowl. "There's one question I am surprised you haven't asked me," he said. "What is there likely to be in this for you?"

"I hadn't thought about it. All I know is that I shall have a chance to get off that bloody plain."

"I can tell you this," he said, still peering downwards. "If you are any good, if you survive, you get a pip to put alongside that crown."

He looked at his watch. "Come back tomorrow at nine and start in. Have a good time tonight."

I had got to the door when he said: "You'll probably find your room has been searched at the hotel, but don't worry."

With my hand on the latch, I asked my last question.

"That man who may have tried to push me off the bridge, do you know his name?"

"Not his proper name," said Sandy, "but we call him *The Skull.*"

He was right about my room; from infinitesimal changes, I knew that everything had been gone over. But nothing was missing.

I enjoyed my evening in Teheran.

Tania was ready when I called to collect her by taxi. She had on a long dark topcoat, and it was not till we walked down the shallow steps from the foyer to the garden restaurant of the Miramar that I saw her in all her glory. She had a long, close, bottle-green frock of some heavy rustling material. It was very simple and there was no jewellery, nothing to set it off but that curling dark red hair, falling to her shoulders. I felt the comforting glow of someone in charge of a lovely girl, when every other man in the room is staring at her.

We sat in the white basket chairs by the glass dance floor, under the open sky. We had a dinner that it would have been impossible to get in London, and paid five times the price I could have afforded, had it not been chargeable to expenses. She was a gay, amusing companion and, as Sandy had said, a wonderful dancer. The time

rushed on, and it was only at the end, when a little thing happened, that a false note came in to bring me back from this world of white table-cloths, shaded lights, and soft dance music.

As we were sitting smoking between dances, she turned over the hand that lay in mine, so that the palm was uppermost; along the pads under the fingers was one long white callous.

"That was sawing logs and chopping wood in Siberia for two years," she said, "and I'm afraid it will never go. Three of us slaves were hired out together to a farmer who starved us; he had a son, a congenital idiot, who used to come and paw us when we were locked in the barn at night."

There was a silence.

Then she said: "Have you ever seen the refugee convoys arriving from Russia on the shores of the Caspian?"

"Yes."

"Then you may have seen me, Bill, for I came here that way. I was naked, with my hair caked and full of lice. They loaded us on the ship like cattle, fed us like cattle, and treated us like cattle. Then, just before we landed, they took all our clothes away. They said it was in case of typhus."

The awful thing was that I had seen it all, and it was perfectly true.

Suddenly she gave a little laugh. "But your troops who were there to collect us were so good; they seemed so young, but they were so wise. They ignored the old men, who did not care, and the young children, who did not know, and concentrated on us women who were ashamed.

"I was lying on the sand, crying, and trying to hide myself, when a sergeant came up to me. He was sweet, Bill, an oldish man with grey hair and crinkly blue eyes. When I said: 'Go away,' he said: 'That's all right, miss, I've got two daughters older than you.'

"Then he looked in the kitbag he had and produced an enormous pair of shorts and an enormous shirt, and he looked at them and said: 'A bit big, but they'll have to do.' Then he gave me a piece of hard grey soap . . ."

"I know, salt-water soap."

"Yes, and he said: 'If you go back into that there sea, miss, and give yourself a good do all over, you'll feel better.' So I scrubbed myself till I was sore and when I came out, he had a towel ready and he helped me on with the shirt and tied up the shorts with string; but I didn't mind, because I was a woman again."

Her face went grave and she was silent, and strangely beautiful in spite of her vanished gaiety.

Soon after, I took Tania home and then went back to the empty hotel room, for Bezard had gone into lodgings. I locked the door and the windows and then slipped into bed with the Webley under my pillow.

At nine o'clock the next morning, I was sitting at the extra desk

that had been put into Sandy's office, ready to start on my home-work. There I stayed through normal office hours for four days, reading, and, to my dismay, having to memorize a vast amount of material. Everything had to be learnt by heart; it was one of Sandy's strictest rules and he was forever drumming it into me.

" Never put anything on paper unless it is absolutely necessary," he said again and again. " In your head nothing can get stolen, and if you die it goes with you."

There was so much to learn—each agent had his own three-figure number—mine was to be 166—and to establish contact, his and your own number had to be introduced into the conversation. There were about fifty of these to be learnt by heart.

The cipher was as simple as it was ingenious. A list of figures, one for each day of the current month, was sent out and had to be memorized. The date of the message gave the key to this number, which corresponded to a verse of Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam. By transposing succeeding letters of this verse to numbers, and vice versa, the cipher was obtained.

When I had arrived that morning there had been an official letter lying on the desk waiting for me. As I opened it, Sandy inquired first as to my health and then if my room had been searched. I said that I was well and it had. Then I stopped, looking at the paper that was in my hand. It was a posting order, for me, from G.H.Q. to proceed forthwith to Beirut and attend the 9th Senior Officers' Course in hygiene and sanitation. I looked up at Sandy, furious. If this was his idea of a joke, or the sort of thing I was fit for, then the sooner . . .

He was grinning all over his face.

" It's the only copy," he said, " leave it lying about in your room, and if our friends have another search, which I am sure they will, it will be copied and passed to their headquarters."

Two match-sticks flew into the ashtray. " And if," he said, as the cloud of smoke swelled round him, " there is the kind of brain behind them that I think there is, that order will ring absolutely true; it is just the sort of bloody silly thing that the British Army would do."

He puffed away. " Anyway, it should keep them off your tail till you are well on the road to Shiraz."

" Shiraz? "

" Yes, that's where you are off to as soon as the transport arrives."

If I had felt angry over the fake posting, now there was nothing but a wave of disappointment. Convoy work, at my time of life; it was probably that god-awful vegetable run.

" And what am I collecting from Shiraz? " I said, icily. " Potatoes? "

Sandy didn't answer; he went to the door of the outer office and stuck his head inside. I heard him say—" Five minutes' clatter, Tania, please." Then he shut it and I could hear the thump and rattle start from the machine.

"No, not potatoes," he said, "gold—about four tons of it." There was a short silence.

"This is top secret, and I had meant to brief you in full later, but you may as well have the rough now. It's bullion from the bank down there, and they are getting worried, because tribal trouble is brewing again. A lot of people could use stuff like that very well. Your transport, armoured cars and lorries, is coming from Palestine, under a captain; the troops are all British and have been hand-picked. You will collect them at Qum, contact our man in Isfahan in case of change of plan, then do the same in Shiraz, load, and bring the stuff back here."

"Do the convoy troops know what they will be carrying?"

"Good God, no; and they mustn't until the last possible moment."

"But—" I said.

"But why waste you on this sort of job when there are a dozen blokes who could do it equally well?"

"That was roughly what I was thinking."

"Because, Bill, I think that an effort will be made to relieve you of your cargo and that if it is, I know you will beat it; also, in the process you may see something, hear something, that may lead us a bit further into the jungle—towards other things. That is why you must go."

And to see if I'm competent, I thought.

On the second morning we were having our tea-break, when Tania came in with two typewritten sheets of paper.

"I've done that Russian translation you wanted," she said. "The first bit was easy, but in the middle were two sentences that I could not make head or tail of. I checked the words with the interpreter here and he agrees with my reading. They are nothing to do with the rest, so I have put them down separately."

Sandy picked up the first sheet and glanced at it. He threw it over to me. It was a translation of the document from the truck.

"They could have had all this for the asking," he said. "But I don't suppose they trust us overmuch."

I looked down the list of supplies at the docks and in transit; as far as I could remember, it seemed to tally with the official list that we sent the Russians every month. The rest of the paper was a detailed battle order of all the British and American troops in the country. There was nothing there of interest.

There was a crackle from the other paper and Sandy said, quietly: "Thank you, Tania; that's all." I looked up, for I had never heard that tone in his voice before; for the first time ever, I saw him sitting absolutely still. Without a word to me, he picked up the telephone. "Get the Provost Marshal," he said.

When the call came through, his voice was casual, indifferent; only I, who now knew it so well, could sense the undercurrent of strain and urgency.

"Is that you, Goodenough? Mackenzie here. Good morning. I put in a routine inquiry yesterday about a truck that one of our

officers picked up between Ahwaz and Andimesk. Yes, near Shush. Have you got anything yet? Oh, they did. Nothing more. I'm obliged, thank you very much."

Crossing over to the window, his back towards me, he said: "They collected the body and truck, admitted they were their property. Tell me again, exactly, what happened."

Yesterday's indifference was not there now. I did my best and he heard me to the end in silence. Then he said: "Would you say the Russian was important?"

I shook my head. "He was young, but it's terribly difficult to judge people's status without any clothes."

"He was alone?"

"I assumed that, but there could have been someone with him who went, or was taken off in the black car. Again, the car itself is supposition, on the mirage."

He spoke very slowly. "There are two messages on this paper. The first I don't understand, but the second refers unmistakably to something that I know, so secret that only three other men in the whole command are in it. At least, I thought so. Now, it seems, even junior Russians can carry it about in trucks and someone else has wind of it, and wants to steal it."

He sighed. "Read *Matthew*, chapter 17, verse 4; you won't be any the wiser, but remember it. And if anything turns up that seems to fit in with that or these"—he held the paper out to me—"for God's sake, let me know at once."

On my way home, I went into the Y.M.C.A. and borrowed a New Testament; *St. Matthew* xvii, 4, said: *. . . it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.*

The two short messages read: *Final meeting before the surnay at red (hut ?) (house ?) by Judas tree in (happiness ?) (content ?)* 19. Here the bracketed queries were Tania's; the second was more straightforward, but equally senseless.

Three tents in Cairo; two fly on; Elias is a Chinaman.

Now I was convinced that Sandy was going stark, staring mad.

I watched him carefully the next day, but there were no further signs of impending breakdown. He was drawn, almost haggard, and terribly jumpy. He was out a great deal, and twice I knew he went to see the General. At lunch-time he summarily dismissed Tania, Sergeant Holman, and me.

I hired a car and we went off for a picnic in one of the gardens at Shemiran on the lower slopes of Demavand. It was 4,000 feet up here and as pleasantly hot as an English summer day. We bathed, basked in the sun, and had our meal of cold chicken and a bottle of wine. It was all so gay and full of laughter, peaceful and very lovely.

We were sitting with our feet over the side, swinging our legs in the water while the sunlight dappled green and gold the ripples that we sent out across the pool. I said: "I'm worried about Sandy; he is getting terribly nervy and overworked . . ."

"Yes, but he is always a bit like that. Only now he has—how do you say it?—more on his plate than usual."

"What is it, Tania?"

"I don't know—I see only the little bits. But I am sure it is something very big. But I am glad you are here, for his sake, Bill. He likes you, and I think you will be a great comfort to him." Then she put her hand over mine where it lay on the stone. "But I'm glad you are here for my own sake more than Sandy's."

I looked down at the hand on mine, then up the slim strong forearm to where the drops of water glistened in fine tracery as they dried on her shoulders. It had all been so natural that I had not given it a thought, but every moment of my spare time in Teheran had been spent in her company. Good God, I thought, I must be falling in love with her.

The next day I completed my studies and passed a searching examination by Sandy. Then he gave me a detailed briefing on the Shiraz job. He was, if possible, more restless and silent than ever. In the evening Tania and I had a quick meal and went to the cinema. I had seen the film in London in about 1938, but I did not recognize it now for the reels were so worn and cut. It was only when we struggled to our feet, to stand stiffly to attention in accordance with general orders on proper respect, while a gramophone blared the fussy Persian anthem; it was only then that I realized we had been holding hands for the entire performance.

Outside it was soft and black in the tree shadows beneath the arc-lights. "Walk me home," Tania said.

We strolled very slowly, arm-in-arm; Tania seemed quiet.

"Where's your boy, Bezard Ali, living?" she said suddenly.

"In some hash house, but he simply loathes Teheran."

"Can you get hold of him easily?"

"Oh, yes. I send a message down by one of the porters." We were at the door of her flat and she had opened it. Then she turned and faced me. I caught her hands in mine. "Till tomorrow, then," I said.

She shook her head. "Not tomorrow, Bill. Sandy got hold of me here after you had left the office. He couldn't ring the hotel and didn't want to go there. The transport is in Qum and you are to get off first thing in the morning. Cipher from Isfahan and Shiraz. Sandy said to wish you good luck and good hunting."

Then, before I could say anything, two arms were round my neck and a soft mouth pressed on mine.

"And good luck from me too, Bill; come back safe and soon." Then the door closed and she was gone.

Qum is a dreary town. The only two points of interest or beauty are the mosque of Fatima—the Prophet's sister—with its wide courts and solid gold-plated dome, and the modern afterthought of a large hotel erected under orders of Reza Shah.

The transit camp was some distance away down the river and

when I got there at noon, Captain Hervey, his men and vehicles were drawn up ready to receive me. I cannot say that I disliked Hervey at first sight; he was just not my type, nor one that I would have picked for this kind of mission. On top of that, he was, at the moment, exuding the kind of bumptious arrogance which is the mark of some men, unsure of themselves and strange in a new country. I decided to start treatment straight away.

"What are the vehicles like on maintenance?" I asked, looking towards the old square Rolls armoured cars; the lorries I could see were nearly new.

"They seem fairly good, sir; they have had normal maintenance since we took over ten days ago."

"Well, though they are only going to be handed over to the Persians in the south, I want to deliver them in one piece. We've got eight hundred miles to cover; bad roads, high passes, and as far as I can remember, exactly one native garage. The nearest spares are probably at Haifa, so I want to know where I am before we start. Lend me some overalls, get yours on, and we will do a proper inspection this afternoon. I want all your men on the job too."

There were a lot of dirty looks and longing glances towards the roofs of Qum; I was sorry for them, but I had to make a check, and I wanted to keep them out of the town. I had also given a reasonable story to cover our journey. On our backs, under sumps, during the inspection, I went on with the job of reducing Master Hervey's ego to reasonable proportions.

It was after six when the last of the cars was finished; I was leaning against the side of one, smoking. I had enjoyed myself, for transport had always been my first love and it was good to feel metal and smell clean oil again.

Hervey had been over with his men, giving them their orders for the dawn start I had decreed for the morning. Now he came back towards me.

He saluted. "This is Sergeant Morris, sir. He wants to ask you something."

"Good evening, Sergeant."

"Good evening, sir. I wonder if it would be all right if I scrounged a lift down to the town now?"

I noticed the camera slung round his neck.

"What do you want to do?"

"Take some photographs of that big mosque."

"Good God, man, you can't do that. They would kill you. Two Yanks tried it early this year, and the mob got them and stoned them to death."

The Sergeant looked shocked and very disappointed. I was tempted, for I badly wanted a photo of the Golden Mosque for myself. Then I had an idea.

I climbed up into the turret and told Morris to come after me; then I pointed to one of the gun-slits in the side.

"Could you take your shot through there?"

He fiddled with his camera. " Easily, sir, if the light outside is good."

" I'll travel in this car tomorrow," I said, " and Morris can come with me. I want everyone below hatches through Qum. On the way out of the town, we have to go right past the gates of the mosque. I'll stop in front for as long as I dare and Morris can take his photos."

I looked up at the sky. " The light should be dead right for you."

It worked beautifully; we coasted down to a crawl in front of the wide entrance to the mosque. I was leading the convoy, sitting in the front seat with the driver; through the visor slit, I could see the crowds of worshippers, flowing to and fro, etched sharply by that clear-washed early light. When we were exactly centred, I said: " Stop." The car jerked to a halt. " Now race your engine and grind the gears." The driver grinned and above the horrible sounds he now produced, I called back into the turret. " You've got a minute, Sergeant." Then I heard the first click of his shutter. I waited as long as I could, then some hooting started from outside and two stones clanged against the side of the car. " Get moving," I said.

We had not gone five hundred yards before this small thing paid off a big dividend. The street had got very narrow and we were crawling along behind a little donkey, almost hidden by the bales it was carrying. On top of these rode a large man and two boys. The wretched beast was moving very slowly and there was no room to pass. Quite suddenly, it stopped, sank to its knees, and then rolled over on its side; without a protest, it had decided to die. The passengers got up from where they had fallen and with curses, blows, and prodding tried to get it to its feet again. It was not a pleasant sight, and my driver cannot have been used to the Middle East treatment of animals; he was shaking in his seat, saying over and over again: " The swine."

I turned my eyes away towards the pavement; standing there, not three yards from me, was a very tall, thin European, dressed in khaki shirt and slacks. He was bare-headed, and his hair, brushed straight back, was very fair; the face was the one that Sandy had drawn on his pad and that had looked at me from out of the window of that black car. It was The Skull.

My mind raced while I made what had to be a split-second decision. In the country, I would have shot first and asked questions after; in Ahwaz or most other towns, I think I would have got out and tried to take him by force back into the car. But in Qum, no; it was too tricky; too dangerous. There was only one little thing that could be done.

I called back into the turret: " Morris, come here quick."

He squeezed half through the connecting door, his head between my shoulder and the driver's. " Do you see that long thin slab—the European?" He stared to where I was pointing through the visor. " Yes, sir," he said.

"I want a picture of him. Get back and take as many as you can through the slits in the turret."

He was standing, with his hands in his pockets, looking towards the donkey. Then he took a step into the road and turned, facing the car; slowly, he walked down the side and out of my vision. I heard Morris, at intervals, clicking behind me. Then the driver put the car in gear. "They are pulling the body away," he said.

When we were clear and had opened the hatch-top, I said to Morris: "How did you get on?"

"I got five, sir. Two at the front, two at the side—they were very close—and one as he was going away."

"Good man! Give me that roll and I'll get it developed in Isfahan." I wanted to get a print back to Sandy as soon as possible; a picture of this gentleman might be very useful to him.

It was late afternoon when the convoy toiled up the last long grade of road to the summit of the Quali Kush Pass. Although over nine thousand feet above sea level, it was very hot, and the vehicles boiled incessantly. Around us lay the parched tawny hills, with nothing to be seen save the line of toiling trucks, each with a white plume of dust streaming behind it.

The sky was palest blue, without a cloud; but to our left this colour faded to a dirty yellow that merged, without a break of horizon, with the lion-skin shade of the ground. There lay the great salt desert of central Persia—the Dasht-i-Kavir; even from this distance, we could feel its hot, relentless breath, and the blown sand gritting against our teeth. Far to the right, the snow-topped peaks of the Zagros mountains jutted into the sky—dim, purple, and mysterious.

Nothing lived there; it was as desolate as the face of the moon—in the last twenty miles, we had passed but two of the square, white-washed forts of the security police—the Amnyé, in their sky-blue uniforms—who had waved from their watch-towers as we went by.

We were on the edge of tribal country now.

My mind ran over those two damned messages: like a prayer, I said them over and over again. Tents and Chinamen I had given up; it was obviously the most important, but Sandy held the clue and until he chose to speak, I could do nothing.

The other one was gibberish; I changed the words round, but it got no better. A meeting, between whom? Surnay? No, that could not be a proper name as it was preceded by the definite article. There must be many happy houses and contented huts and millions of Judas trees in Persia. The figures could be a number of persons, or even a date.

One word stuck out. Surnay. I knew I had heard it before. Then I went on to the next problem, which was Bezard Ali. He was now directly behind me, driving my own truck.

Bezard was gay; he was going south now, among the mountains to the people of his own tribe. But supposing they were involved in an attempt on the convoy? Bezard, his loyalty torn, would be

placed in an impossible position. It would be better to give him leave till this trip was over.

Hervey and his troops, I had no qualms about. The former, twenty-six, tall, and good-looking, seemed to know his job, and already I had half tamed him, though his manner was still too hearty for my liking. His men, thirty strong, were well armed and appeared to be efficient.

Soon we were on our way down the far side of the pass, the engines running cooler. When the shadows had lengthened, I ran the convoy off onto the desert at the side of the road. Then I showed Hervey how we formed up at night in these parts to avoid any surprise.

" Someone might try to pinch a spare tyre or a few rations," I told him, " or it might be a full-scale raid.

" Put your vehicles in a tight hollow square—the bonnets facing outwards; the men are to sleep in the cabs with their arms loaded beside them. If the guard sounds an alarm, all they have got to do is to switch on their headlights to have visibility in every direction.

" Tell the guard that the tribesmen usually come in crawling on all fours with a sheepskin over their backs—they look just like dogs in the half-light; the rule is to shoot first and ask questions after."

He looked at Bezard. " Your driver is a tribesman, isn't he? "

" Bezard's all right." Nevertheless, we would soon be in Quashgai territory and I had decided Bezard must go.

The night came down quickly—pleasant and cool. The sky was like black velvet, dusted with innumerable stars. After a meal, we all sat round the fire and talked, and there were many more questions.

I told them a little of what they would see of the glories of Isfahan and of Shah Abbas the Great—a contemporary of our first Queen Elizabeth—who gave the city the splendour of its mosques and colleges. Of the Maidan-i-Shah—the King's Square—nearly one-third of a mile long, where in the old days polo was born and played by sides a hundred strong. I told them of the miles of bazaar—the gold and silver work, painted ivory miniatures, silks and rare brocades.

Bezard Ali, having put out my bed, had joined the circle.

I said: " When we get further south towards Shiraz, you may see something of the Quashgai—the great fighting tribe. My driver is a cousin of one of their sub-khans, or kalantars . . .

" Oh, Bezard," I called across to him, " tell these men something of the ways of your people."

Bezard squatted, his dark features lit by the flames; then, hesitating at first, he began to describe the life in the mountains. He told of their kishlak, the winter quarters on the plains; of the trek when the spring came, by caravan.

Rolled in my blankets, I could still hear his voice; then one phrase cut across my thoughts: ". . . and then, in the dawn, when the surnay sounds," he said, " the tents are struck and the animals loaded." He was speaking of the trek to and from the hills.

Of course, the surnay was the tribal musical instrument; a sort of long reed trumpet affair, used for dancing, as a signal for reveille, and to give the orders when the tribe were on the move. Before the surnay, I thought, that could mean before a dance, before dawn, or before the move to the kishlak. If it's the last, this meeting can't be for another two months, at least, for they don't start to move down from the yilak, the summer pasture, till the end of August.

In the early evening I drove down the Chahar Bagh in Isfahan. I was riding in a low-slung open carriage. The Street of the Four Gardens was wide and shady; the white bark and pale green leaves of the chenar trees that lined it made a pleasant contrast with the blue sky and the lilac and roses of the gardens.

We had arrived early that morning; coming down the last slopes of the pass, to see the vivid green of the valley and the blue domes of the mosques gleaming in the sun. I had left the convoy on the fringe of the cultivation—I did not want unnecessary speculation on its unusual composition—and had promised the men a chance to come into town and see the sights later. Then I had got myself a room in the hotel and dismissed Bezard Ali for the day: now I was on my way to make the first contact.

The carriage turned into the Maidan, where I stopped it and paid off the driver. I stood for a moment, looking across the great square at the crowds hurrying to and fro, at the riot of colour of the flowers in the gardens, but most of all at the three great mosques that dominate the scene. Their fronts and domes were tiled in intricate patterns—coils and sprays of flowers—every inch of space filled with design. The theme was blue; everywhere was this colour, and in every shade from turquoise to ultramarine. I turned and made my way into the bazaar, towards the Street of Silks.

I had to push my way through; past camels, shuffling forward with their rubber-legged gait; donkeys, laden so that only their hoofs and muzzles showed.

Between the animals were the people; white-robed mullahs, tall pilgrims striding past with green bands in their turbans; women, sliding by with baskets or jars on their heads, anonymous in their blue veils and black trousers, and the children, stark naked or in a few rags, darting beneath the beasts and rolling in the dust. At the sides, as always, the beggars crouched; diseased and covered with filth, sores, and flies. The noise was deafening; the shouts of the shopkeepers extolling their wares mixed with the whine of the beggars, the cries of the children, and the commands of the camel-drivers demanding passage.

It took me quite a time to reach the Street of Silks. First I passed the goldsmiths—their trays full of shining sovereigns, French louis, and twenty-dollar pieces. Then, the silversmiths, sitting intent with their long engraving tools, working at bowls or cases that they held between their feet; the potters, making the

clay live as they spun it to shape on their wheels; the bales of carpet, from Bokhara, Tabriz and Kerman; the silks and brocades last of all, gleaming with colour as the shafts of evening light played round them from the arches between the pillars. I paused to check my memory—127, Aristide Manassian, Armenian shopkeeper, Street of Silks.

Soon I found his booth; it was larger than most, and there was a notice in Persian and English spread over the door. It said: ARISTIDE MANASSIAN, DEALER IN BROCADE, SILKS, AND FINE ARTS. ENGLISH SPOKEN. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED BY H. B. M. CONSULATE. I went in.

A Persian boy was dusting the wares in the front room. I examined a few miniatures and turned over a bale of silks; then I asked for the proprietor. The boy, a terrible cast in his eye, managed to go to the back of the shop and peer through a curtain, while keeping me in view at the same time. A few moments later, a short figure came out into the front shop.

Tubby, with sleek black hair and a swarthy Armenian face, he was dressed in an immaculate white drill suit.

He bowed. "I am Mr. Manassian, sir, can I help you?" This was in excellent English.

"I want to buy some brocade—the consulate told me this was the best place."

He came over and undid a bale of the stuff, which spilled to the floor in a flood of lovely colour. I picked out one piece—red roses were embossed on a background of gold and green. I saw that he was eyeing my uniform.

"How much is this?"

"Only five hundred rials, sir. It is well worth it. I keep my prices down to a fair figure of profit to please the consulate. They—"

I broke in. "I don't care if your prices please the consulate or not; it is too much for me. I only have one hundred and twenty-seven rials to spend."

He stared at me. "How much did you say?"

"One hundred and twenty-seven rials."

He shook his head. "I cannot let this piece go at that price, but perhaps I may have something in the back room that would interest you."

He parted the curtain and motioned me inside. It was cool and much quieter there. He said something to the boy, drew the curtain back across the doorway and motioned me to a chair. Then he sat down. His eyes were darting everywhere. Mr. Manassian was very nervous.

"Can you give me a reason why you can only spend this amount?"

"I'll give you a hundred and sixty-six if you want them." My number was disclosed, and after a moment I held out my hand. "I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Manassian."

Relief flowed into his face. "Welcome to Isfahan, Major," he

said. "I had heard someone was coming—but I have to be so careful."

As I introduced myself he went to the corner, fiddled with the lock, and swung open the door of the safe.

"A drink, Major?"

I could see his nervousness returning; twice he stopped to peer through the curtain into the shop. Then at last he sat down.

"There is quite a lot I have to tell you, but I do not feel this shop is a good place. I suggest that I call on you at your hotel tomorrow? I shall come to your rooms as a pedlar of brocade."

"Room 26 at about noon, will that suit you?"

He nodded. Then I put Sergeant Morris's roll of film on his desk.

"Could you get that developed for me? I want two copies of the largest clear prints possible."

"Yes," he said, "I shall bring them with me tomorrow."

He stood up; he seemed anxious for me to go.

"Do you know why I am here?" I said.

He nodded. "Oh yes, and I'm afraid you will have some trouble with your mission." His face clouded. "There is a great deal more unrest than most of us care to think. You will get your cargo out just in time."

"Who do you think is going to try and take it away from me? The Friends of—" He thrust a hand across my mouth, and then was round the desk, peering through the curtain.

"Do not use that name here," he hissed at me, "they are evil men. They are strong in this town, there are many Persians in its high places, but even they do not know the masters. I had an idea, but what use are ideas without proof?" Now he had me by the arm and was pushing me towards the door.

"There's just one other thing," I said, half resisting him. "There are two new intercepted messages. What do you think about them?"

I repeated them slowly and gave him my conclusions to the first.

Again he shook his head. "I know nothing of Chinamen and have never been in Cairo. But I think something more about the surnay. There is one other time when it is sounded, high and long."

"When is that?"

"When they go to war," he said.

He almost heaved me out through the curtain into the front of the shop. "Till tomorrow, then." He bowed me out in the best Oriental manner, and I was swept again into the noise and colour of the bazaar.

I had a fine room on the first floor of my hotel with a verandah overlooking the garden. I was sitting there, hot, tired, and thirsty, when the little Armenian arrived. He was still in the same drill suit, clutching a panama hat and a suitcase.

"I have brought some good stuff for you to see, Major," he said as he spread the lovely material over the bed, table, and chairs.

As I turned it over, he kept up a running flow of questions and answers on our work. The majority was routine stuff. Once he sat down suddenly, pulled off his little pointed shoe, and produced two pieces of paper from inside his sock.

"These are for Sandy, through the consulate," he said. "I dare not go there too often myself, it would look suspicious as I am not a British national."

He said suddenly: "I have been thinking of your messages. The second I do not understand, but I shall go on trying; in the first, I see more light; there is a link somewhere with the tribes and I think that it is important. If I find it, I shall cipher you at Shiraz. You are leaving in the morning, I think."

"Yes, I don't want the men hanging around here for too long."

I bought a lovely brocade coat, about two hundred years old, which he let me have very cheaply. I thought it would be nice for Jean—as a wedding present; this, with a note to wish her luck, would show that, in spirit, I had danced at her wedding.

After the transaction was completed, I said to the little man: "How long have you been working for us, Mr. Manassian?"

"Since the beginning of the war."

"Has it been difficult?"

"Hard work, yes, and sometimes dangerous. Before the Allies came, there were riots and I was put in prison twice, but the authorities could prove nothing and had to let me go. Persian prisons are not pleasant places. Since then, I have been attacked—" he touched his chair and smiled. "Luckily, with no grave hurt."

"May I ask what you are paid for this?"

"My expenses and a thousand rials a month."

I calculated this at just over eight pounds sterling.

"Then, if I am not being impertinent, why do you do it? Why risk so much for so little?"

He stared out over the garden.

"To get a British passport," he said, simply.

Then he went on: "You may think it strange, but my life's desire is to be a British subject; I have been promised naturalization when this is all over. I do not wish to go to England—I shall never leave Isfahan—but it would be pleasant to join the club and be received at the consulate.

"An English gentleman—" he added, half under his breath.

He got up and recovered his bag. He had got to the door when he stopped.

"I nearly forgot your photos," he said.

I looked them over quickly; Sergeant Morris was a good photographer; he had got The Skull clearly, full face, profile, and from the back as he had walked away. In the prints he looked as unpleasant as he did in real life. I took a fifty-rial note from my pocket-book and handed it over with one of the prints.

"Do you know this bird?" I said.

The effect on him was pitiable; his bag dropped with a thud

to the floor and he stood quite still, his neck stretched forward, eyes pinned on the print that I was still holding. Then, I swear he made the faint movement of crossing himself. "Oh, God, no!" he said. "Not here, not in Isfahan?"

He did not seem to pay any attention; he was speaking to himself. "If he comes south it is all over. Wherever he goes there is disaster; he is the worst, most evil man in all Persia. I must go. It is not safe to be seen here, or anywhere. I shall go into hiding. If you want to reach me on your return, you can always find me through one man." He came very close and I could see the beads of sweat standing out on his cheeks and chin.

"Do you know Ali, the blind driver of the camel at the opium press?"

"I have seen him," I said.

"Then go to Ali, give him a coin—the large silver toman—and say, 'Aristide said to give you this.' Then he will give you any message, take one, or tell you where I am. He is safe, for I did him a great service once."

"I'll do that if necessary," I said. "But does The Skull, as we call him, know you?"

His voice was hopeless. "Yes, and I think he knows what I am." His eyes were darting round the room.

"Now I go," he said. "Please see if there is anyone about."

I unlocked the door and looked both ways down the corridor. There was no one in sight. I beckoned and he was past me in a flash. I watched until he had turned the corner and there was a great surge of pity in me. I have never seen a pair of legs trying so hard not to run.

We met once more—sooner than we both had thought.

It was early the next morning—one of those soft, still, clear Persian dawns.

I had told Hervey to move the convoy through the town to the south side before many people were about; he had done this and the armoured car in which I was travelling had come to the hotel to collect me. The problem of Bezard's presence with us in his own tribal country he had settled for himself; by some mysterious means, he had discovered the whereabouts of his kalantar's yilak; at the moment they were two days' march to the south-west of Isfahan, and he had come to me the night before and asked for leave to visit them. I gladly consented, and had arranged to drop him off on the road down.

The armoured car was standing at the foot of the steps of the hotel; Bezard had finished loading my kit and was standing by the truck while I was getting ready to hoist myself into the turret, when I saw a short white figure hurrying down the drive from the gate. Little Manassian was still trying hard not to run. He came up at a shuffling trot, and leaned against the side of the car, panting.

His tie was awry, and his suit looked as if it had been slept in; there were great brown stains under his eyes, his face was sallow—very tired and very frightened.

" I'm thankful I caught you," he gasped. " My shop was ransacked last night—I have been hiding till the light in case they came back again. They left this—" he held up a white card with its well-remembered emblem. " I think they are following me, they have been making inquiries about you in the bazaar—I know that they—"

The bullet went SPLAT between our heads on the side of the car. A fraction of a second later came the distant report of a rifle and the whine of the ricochet. Instinctively we had both jumped back, and I looked, unbelieving, at the silver smear on the steel plate. Then I grabbed Manassian and ducked round to the sheltered side. Bezard had pulled his pistol and was peering over the top, while inside the turret the driver was cursing.

It was impossible to say from where the shot had come. Bezard said: " Shall I search the garden, sahib? "

I had a look; everything was as still and peaceful as the grounds of a first-class hotel should be. " No, Bezard, it probably came from those tall houses outside and I don't want you to get killed."

Manassian seemed to have shrivelled and his face had gone a dirty grey. " That was meant for me," he sobbed.

" Or me," I answered. " Come with me to Shiraz—this place is too hot for you at the moment."

He shook his head. " It will be all right for the moment—it's too public here for them to try anything again."

He nodded to where a group of hotel servants, attracted by the noise, were gaping from the steps.

I tried to persuade him; but he was adamant. Bezard boarded the truck and, with Manassian pushing behind, I was up and through the hatch. I grabbed a tin hat and a tommy-gun and looked down at the little man.

" If you are sure—" I felt horribly guilty, leaving him like this.

" Yes, yes, Major; please get going—and good luck on your journey. Do not forget blind Ali and the silver toman." Then he spoke to me in Persian—the first time he had used the language: " *Houda harvez*—God go with you."

There was nothing to do but start; I turned and looked back. He was standing on the steps, a short white figure drawn up with some dignity, waving with his absurd panama hat. I never saw him again.

We stopped at the 150-kilometre stone between Isfahan and Shiraz to drop Bezard Ali. I have no idea at all how he knew the exact whereabouts of the kalantar, but he seemed to watch the line of mountains to our left and suddenly asked to be put down. I arranged to pick him up at the same spot on the seventh day; if we did not show up, he was to walk towards Shiraz to meet us. Then I paid him, and he was doing well, for on top of his pay he could now draw British ration allowance.

He swung himself down from the car, and waving good-bye to the shouts and calls that came from the convoy, for he had become

very popular, walked off, in his long stride, towards the mountains. With a rifle slung across his shoulder, a bundle of hard rations, tea, and sugar in his hand, we watched him till he had dwindled to a small speck in that quiet loneliness.

It was only about two hundred miles from here to Shiraz, but we could not make the same speed as before. The way was rougher and the country, though fertile, was far more wild. The road wound and twisted between great rock cliffs, or edged along a precipice—with no guarding wall on its outer edge to stop a drop of perhaps two hundred feet into a raging, boulder-strewn torrent below. Twice these rivers had to be forded—for there were no bridges—and the vehicles were winched across through three feet of icy, rushing water. It was still hot at midday, but a chill came on in the late afternoon. We were climbing slowly to the high plateau of Shiraz, six thousand feet above sea level.

There was more vegetation; groves of stunted cork-oak, fields of wild lupins and waving blue poppies. The forts of the Amnyé were gone; in their place, on some high crag, once or twice I saw the silhouette of a crouching figure, a rifle thrown across the knees. The tribe were on the look-out now.

With seventy miles to go, the shadows were lengthening when we had reached the place that I had in mind as a camp.

On the right of the road was a deserted *chaikhana* and there I turned the vehicles into the courtyard; across the way, backed by a long green mountain, rose tier upon tier of terraces and tall pillars. This was Persepolis—all that remained of the great palaces of Darius and Xerxes, built more than two thousand years before.

After a meal, Hervey and I, wrapped in the long sheepskin coats that were called poshteens, climbed up the slope to watch the moon rise. Far below, in the courtyard, the troops' fire glimmered and sparked; on the terrace beneath, the twenty slender pillars that were still standing gleamed pale and threw long blue shadows on the pavement. As the moon rose, it lit on the reliefs carved on the walls and etched the processions of bearded men and strange beasts sharper than the light of day.

We both jumped as there was a sudden crack behind us. I laughed. "It's all right—only the stone changing temperature after the heat of the day."

We went down and felt one of the fluted columns; it was giving off its stored warmth like a radiator and making a strange humming noise in the process.

Hervey said: "It's lovely here—but very lonely."

"You won't get a Persian to come within miles of the place at night."

"Why?"

"They think it's haunted."

"By what?"

"Oh, the ghosts of the old kings, and Isakander."

"Who the hell was he?"

" Alexander the Great—the present-day Persian here still speaks of him as if he were alive."

I told him the little I knew; how the part on which we were standing had been built by Darius, while the ruins to our left, which looked rather like Stonehenge, were those of the palace of Xerxes; how Alexander came here at the age of twenty-six, on his way to conquer half the world, and defeated the Persians in a great battle; and then proceeded to sack Persepolis.

" He is supposed to have taken away ten thousand mule-carts and five thousand camel-loads of gold and silver alone."

" What happened then? "

" Alexander had the usual drunken party here to celebrate his victory, and while it was on, at the suggestion of his concubine, Thais, he ordered the whole place to be destroyed by fire. In an odd way this has been to our gain; the flames preserved the stone and baked the clay tablets hard so that they can be read today, and because of the legend of haunting the Persians have not stripped the place of stone for later buildings. That is why it is so well preserved now."

" What is Shiraz like? " he then asked.

" Much smaller than Isfahan. There are more beautiful gardens, but hardly any fine buildings—except, perhaps, Hafiz's tomb. Do you like Persian poetry? "

" I've only read Omar Khayyam."

I said: " If you mention him here, the average Persian will express polite amusement; they can never understand what we can see in the light verse an eminent astronomer wrote in his spare time. I suppose we like it because he happens to have been so well translated into English. The Persian thinks far more of Sa'di and Hafiz—both lived and died in Shiraz."

There was a silence; Hervey looked very public school.

" You love this country, don't you? " he said at last.

I looked out over the pale ruins and the moonlit plain. " I loathed it when I first came, then I was frightened of it; but it grows on you fast, especially in the south." I looked at the moon—now well up. " Three days to the full, I'm off to bed," I said.

We made good time across the plain, and came down the last defile to Shiraz in the early morning of the next day. The sides of the hills were ablaze with wild flowers, lilac, and roses. We passed through the gate, that narrow cleft in the rocks where the caravans of old had cried: " *Allaha Alu*—God is good."

Like them, we saw the broad valley stretching out with its vineyards, orange and lemon groves—and everywhere the slender dark green cypresses, reaching to the sky.

Shiraz was a country town. There was not the bustle and noise of Isfahan. The tempo of life moved at a slower, easier pace. Everywhere, there was greenery and the sound of running water. Little streams, the jubes, chuckled by in stone troughs at the sides of each road, or fell in cascades down the rocks; their water was

star-clear, unlike the garbage-laden muck that flowed through the streets of Teheran. Everywhere possible was planted with flowers, even the roofs of the houses had a layer of earth on their flat tops, each laid out like another garden. The buildings were small, and falling into decay, for Shiraz, the former capital, was content to dream on, living in its past, its poetry, and its roses.

I had made my number—in both senses—with the Vice-Consul, Major Brooks, who doubled his official duties with that of agent 199.

The troops and the vehicles had been quartered in a disused compound belonging to the oil company; Hervey and I, who were staying in Brooks's bungalow, had arranged to sleep in turn with the men, in case there was an emergency. Hervey had taken the first turn of duty, so Brooks and I were sitting alone on his verandah after dinner, smoking and looking out over his garden.

Like all in Shiraz, it was perfect. The moon was not yet up, but the still " mirror " pool before us reflected the stars and the lights of the house behind. The cypress trees showed as thin dark lines against the sky; the air was full of the scent of roses and the nightingales were singing.

John Brooks was short, fat, and jovial—he had a nice twinkling eye and I had at once taken to him. With half his life spent in south Persia, first in rugs and then in the Diplomatic Service, his knowledge of the country—politics, trade and history—was profound.

He asked for details of the trip, and then came quickly to the business which was the point of my visit. " I know Sandy has briefed you, but do the troops know anything yet? "

" I was told not to tell them; they think that they are here to deliver the cars to the Persian Army. Possibly they have heard the talk in the bazaars—that we are going to have a crack at the tribe."

" You wouldn't like that, would you? "

" No, I would not; my sympathies are with the Quashgai; it's not their fault that the war has upset their trading economy; it's reasonable to want to be left in peace."

" Does being left in peace include giving a so-called Persian armoured brigade a damn good hiding and then shelling this town with the field-guns they had captured? Now it looks as if they were at it again, on a much larger scale." He bent forward and put a hand on my knee. " Everything I see myself, and every message that comes to me, confirms that there is a terrific tension in the yilaks in the mountains. They are boiling up for something and it isn't ordinary Persian Army baiting. Next time, they won't be content to besiege Shiraz, they will take the place."

" And so to the gold," I said.

" Yes; if you have any trouble with it, you can blame me; I insisted that it was moved. God knows how they managed to acquire so much here. It was too dangerous, Bill, too big a prize. It had to go."

We talked for a while about the details of the move. Brooks was sure that the moment we were at the bank, the knowledge would be all over the town within minutes. " It will be a case of pick up, out, and no stopping," he said. He also suggested the two boiling armoured cars should be stripped down and left as a blind and a peace offering to the Persians.

" Do you think that they will have a crack at me? "

" On the way back? No. I think that they are too busy working on this bigger thing and they have not got the tribe ready for it yet. We are making this shift a little too early for them."

" What about the Friends of Iran? "

He smiled. " That lot. I don't know a great deal about them, so far, for they haven't been much in evidence down here. They exist in the town—you'll meet one of the higher-ups at dinner here tomorrow, but whatever Sandy may think, I cannot see that their inspiration is very strong." The cane chair creaked as he shifted. " Intrigue is meat and drink to a Persian." He went on: " They have formed this secret society and they have a good intelligence service. A few trimmings, like telephone calls to you, threats to Manassian, and cards left in hotel bedrooms, keep them quite happy."

" I don't believe it."

" I didn't think you would; there is one other theory, but it is so fantastic . . ." He left it at that.

" Tell me."

He got up and took my glass. " While I'm getting you another whisky," he said, " I'll leave you with a thought. You have been about this country a lot? "

" Yes."

" And into the Russian zone quite often? "

" About once a month before I was put on this job."

" Well, have you ever seen or heard of one single act of trouble or sabotage by the Friends in the Russian area? "

" No, but—"

He had gone into the house. I sat waiting, thinking over the extraordinary implication of his question. The Russians, working through the Persians, against their own war effort and allies. He was quite right—it was fantastic.

The great yellow cheese of a moon had come over the hills, putting a sheen on the tops of the leaves of the bushes. John Brooks had just come back to the table and was in the act of setting down the glasses, when a voice, quiet but urgent, called from the dark shadows in one corner of the garden.

He did not seem surprised or startled; he put the glasses down carefully and then walked to the edge of the " mirror " pool, standing with one foot on its parapet. Then he asked a question back into the blackness and the voice answered him in the same quick, breathless monotone. They were speaking in the tribal language of Turki, which I did not understand.

When there was silence John pulled out his pocket-book. He

took out a bank-note and picked up a stone from the path. Screwing this up inside it, he threw the ball towards the edge of the shadows. Not a word was said, but I saw a brown hand and part of a white sleeve dart out and snatch it back.

As he came back up the steps he was writing something in his note-book.

"They make me keep accounts for these payments," he said. "That was a message from the Allaha gate. A strange car arrived there from the north an hour ago. There were three men in it—Europeans. Only one got out at the police post, and he was very tall and fair. I think I would like to see that photo of your friend, The Skull. It sounds as if he is paying a visit to Shiraz."

It was getting late, so I unburdened myself of the last commission that Sandy had given me, and passed on the two messages. I told John of the circumstances of their discovery and Sandy's marked reaction to Chinamen. He repeated this and then shook his head.

"Sandy has told me nothing, except that there is something vital brewing; something he said gave me a feeling it was to do with the north. But if he knows what it means, there's precious little we can do until he comes clean."

He repeated the other message slowly. "Meeting will be before the surnay in the happy red hut by the Judas tree. I think Manassian was right about the kind of surnay call—it would tie up with the tension in the hills. But happy red huts . . ." he shrugged his shoulders.

"But if the figures are a date," he added, after a moment, "we either have a day to find the hut or at least a month. The day after tomorrow is the nineteenth of June."

It was about eighteen hours later that I realized I had not given him the message in its original form, but in one of the twisted versions I had made up as I had puzzled over it. That slip made quite a lot of difference.

Then the telephone shrilled in the house, and John got up to answer it. He was gone a long time. When he came back, he had a slip of paper in his hand, and I saw on it the long line of figures. "Cipher from Isfahan," he said, "but it's from that fellow in the consulate, not Manassian."

He sat down and looked at it, passing me the copy of Omar Khayyam that he had brought out with him.

"Sent today, the seventeenth," he said. "What's the key?"

"Seventy-one," I replied and opened the book at the verse of that number.

It read: *The Moving Finger writes: and, having writ;*
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

John Brooks was writing down the letters of the alphabet in a row; when he said: "Ready," I started to spell out the letters one by one from the beginning of the verse. As I read T, H, E, he

wrote 1, 2, 3, against the corresponding letter in his list until it was filled up with the exception of J, Q, X and Z, which did not occur in any of the words. These he filled in consecutively; J became 23, Q, 24, and so on. Repeat letters were ignored.

Then he had:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
14	20	21	15	3	10	9	2	7	23	22	16
M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
4	8	5	19	24	11	13	1	18	6	12	25
					Y	Z					
					17	26					

The message from Isfahan read:

17.6. 2021051119914815166. 12710518815153141578117631122871031513221816169583135 1812.

On transposing these numbers back to letters, with quick trials to see if a group of two, or single figures, made sense, the message took shape quickly. With growing horror, I read over his shoulder:

17.6. 202 FOR 199 AND 166. 127 FOUND DEAD IN RIVER KNIFED. SKULL GONE SOUTH.

Brooks said: "Poor Manassian—poor little bastard."

There was silence while he put a match to all the papers on which we had been working; then he took the copy of Omar back into the house and returned with more large whiskies and soda.

I had sunk back in my chair—feeling awful. Why hadn't I refused to listen to the little man and taken him with me by the scruff of his neck? Apart from the shock and his value to us, I had liked him well—so unassuming, with his odd ambition and his absurd panama hat. I felt that I was, in part, responsible for his death. Brooks said quietly, as he turned his glass in his hand: "So he won't get his British passport after all."

We drank in silence, save for the sobbing of the nightingales; the scent of the roses drifted towards us—sweet and strong.

The next day was spent entirely on the vehicles. I let Hervey into the secret and he had started the camouflage by stripping down the cars and lorries until they looked as if they could not move for a month. The dinner party was that night, when several of the local notables had been asked to meet us. Before they arrived John Brooks had a quiet word with me. "The bird I want you to watch," he said, "is Soulimain Abbas, he is a big landowner here. He is the 'friend' I was talking about, and I don't trust him farther than I can spit. He is up to his neck in intrigue, but I just haven't been able to pin anything on him yet. His pose is that of champion of the Allied cause."

The dinner and the company were of the best, but Manassian's death lay over me like a cloud. I concentrated on Soulimain Abbas Ali; fat and debauched, he wheezed obsequious affability.

"Please do me the honour of dining with me tomorrow night, Major."

I saw John Brooks slightly nod his head.

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"I should like to," I said.

"Come in the afternoon and you can see the garden at its best. You can change in the house later."

After they had all gone, John looked at me.

"You may find nothing, but you will certainly see something there. Keep your hands off his dancing girls, though. He has got about twenty of them stowed away."

I don't suppose that I shall ever see anything to approach that famous garden, the Bagh-i-Aram. The old Persian country house, with its long deep portico, faced across the customary "mirror" pool. This was surrounded by tall cypresses, and curious pines with long bare trunks and only a knob of foliage at the very top. The rest of the garden fell away in a gradual slope for about half a mile. Down the centre of a broad avenue flanked by more cypresses, ran a stream fed from the pool, which tumbled on its way over little waterfalls. In the distance a red building gleamed.

But it was the roses that took your breath away; in between the shrubs, by the paths, and on the walls surrounding the garden, there were millions of them. Of every shade from pale yellow to deepest crimson, the gusts of wind that came over the walls set them all dancing and spinning, and blew their scent towards you in heavy waves that were intoxicating. Bee-eaters—little green and gold birds—darted everywhere; far beyond, like a backcloth, was the blue and silver of the snow-capped mountains.

My host met me and showed me my room for changing; then, to my relief, he left me to wander where I wished. So I strolled, with all the afternoon before me, almost drunk with the sight and smell of the place. Eventually, I reached the little red building that I had seen before in the distance; it was a single-storeyed summer-house.

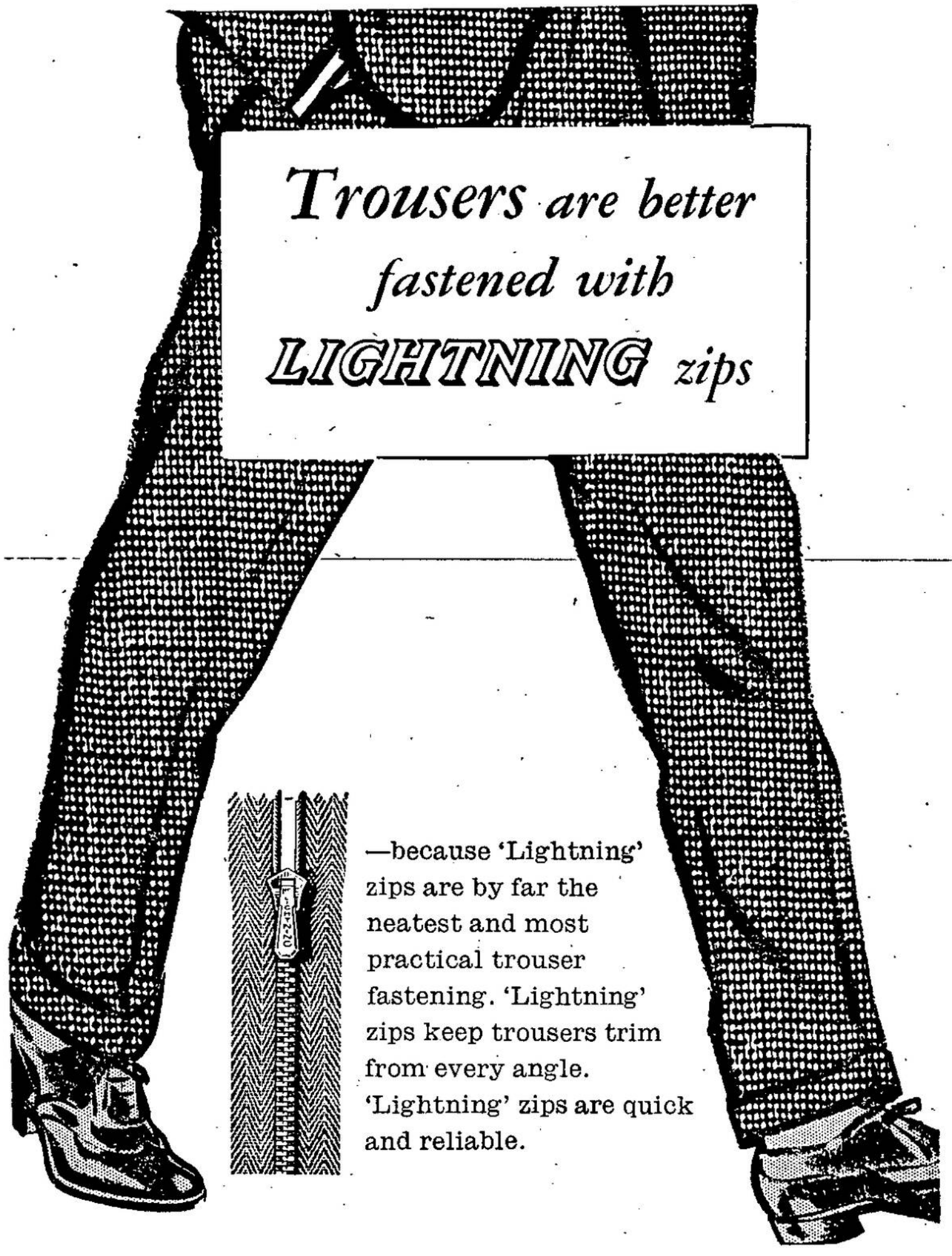
"Bagh-i-Aram—Garden of Heart's Content," I murmured, half aloud.

Then like the tumblers of a lock falling into place, each word of the first message became clear. I was looking straight at a red hut in (the garden of) content. Behind my back was the rough bark of a tree. I looked up, almost hoping it would not be true. But there were the sharp thorns and the little violet flower-clusters of a Judas tree.

The message was completed.

I walked round the house and tried the doors. There were two and both were locked. I peered in the windows. Then I went to a bench near by and sat down, trying to assess the whole thing and make some kind of plan.

First I checked my diary; today was June 19th, and full moon. Then the message again: "Final meeting before the surnay at red hut in Content 19." Why the hell didn't John Brooks spot it? He should know what Bagh-i-Aram meant in English. Then for the first time I remembered the version that I had given him; but by switching the place of the key word *content*, I had changed it from a noun to an adjective relating to the hut. As such, the name



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LF.139

of the garden would have given him no clue. Well, that was that, and I had no means of warning him now; my truck had gone back to the town until it came for me after dinner.

While I debated the imponderables, the stream in the garden went chuckling on near me; I noticed that it disappeared under the side of the little house, emerging again at the other end. I remembered that this was the normal method of cooling buildings during the summer in these parts.

I made my way slowly back to the house.

I was alone for the evening and all it might bring. The initiative was with the other side: I could only keep my eyes and ears wide open.

In my room, my clothes had been laid out for changing; and there I got my first view of one of the famous dancing girls. She was about fifteen, very pretty, as Persian women can be in the first flush of their youth. Unveiled, she was dressed in thin baggy trousers and a brocade jacket that left her midriff bare and scarcely concealed her small pointed breasts.

She stood by the bed, smiling. "*Hammam*, sahib?" she said. A bath seemed a good idea and I nodded; she led the way down a passage to the changing-room of the Persian bath. I stood there, waiting for her to go—she, waiting for me to undress. Eventually she won.

Stripped, with a towel round my waist and the heavy leather sandals provided on my feet, I went down a flight of steps to the *hammam*. It was a small high-domed chamber, the stone floor burning from the heat of a furnace below. The only fittings were a bench in one corner and an iron pipe that hung from the roof, with a tap and a spray at the end.

I had put down my towel and was preparing to shave, when there was the clip-clop of another pair of feet coming down the stairs. My attendant entered in the same state of dress as I. Her figure was better now than it had been clothed and there was not a hair on her pale body. She advanced to the spray and turned on the tap. The water, hitting the hot floor turned at once to steam. Then she came towards me through the fog, a small cake of soap in her hand.

I joined my host for dinner at about eight o'clock. We were in the room behind the verandah, sitting on cushions on the floor, the platters spread between us; Soulimain kept a good table, but was sufficiently westernized to allow the use of knives and forks. We had *zubab*, grilled mountain trout, and then *fezanjan*—a delicious pilau of chicken, raisins and wild Bokhara plums; this stood on a pile of white rice and was covered with a sauce made black and thick from ground walnuts and pomegranate juice. The whole was washed down with an abundance of yellow Shiraz wine —with its bouquet of dry Tokay, served from pear-shaped flasks, blown from deep green glass.

If the dinner was good, the company was the reverse. There was one other guest, the nephew of my host—a wall-eyed gentle-

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man called Marzak. He scarcely uttered one word and left the floor soon after dessert. Soulimain did his best to keep the conversation going, but his efforts were somehow forced, and twice I caught him looking furtively at his watch.

I noticed that Soulimain saw to it that my glass was never empty. So, I thought, the idea is to make me drunk and talkative, you are very welcome to try.

The conversation died at last, and demanding fresh air, I went out on the verandah; I saw to it that my walk was slightly unsteady.

Soulimain followed and stood behind me. "Would you care for another drink—a brandy and soda?"

"Thank you." I leaned on the balustrade, looking out over the garden. The great yellow moon was already high, drenching the leaves and flowers of the garden with gold; its reflection was thrown back unwinking from the pool. Against its light and the faint star-dust of the sky, the silhouette of the pines and cypresses showed dark and clear. The scent of the roses came in overpowering waves and the nightingales were bursting their throats with melody. This was something that I would never forget.

Perhaps I was already on the alert, or Soulimain thought that I was really drunk; but his actions now were incredibly clumsy.

He had gone back into the room to fetch the drinks; then a loud "clink" of glass on glass made me turn my head quickly. He was standing at the table, half turned away from me; two glasses were there already filled with brandy, but with the decanter in one hand, he was trying to hold the stopper while he poured the entire contents of a small bottle into one of the glasses.

I turned my head away—So you're going to dope me, I thought.

Then he came back and handed me my glass.

"To your very good health, Major," he said.

I turned the glass in my hands, playing for time.

"What's that?" I asked suddenly, pointing down into the shadows of the garden at the far end of the verandah.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a man down there." I made a half-lurching step in the direction. He fell for it beautifully. Moving fast for a man of his bulk, he waddled to the end of the balcony and leaned over, staring down into the shadows.

I just had time to lift my glass to my nose—it was chloral—and then slide the contents into a tub of flowers that was beside me, before he turned and came back.

"I can't see anything," he said.

Then he saw my empty glass. "You drink fast, Major."

"Not usually, but I have just drained a toast to this lovely garden." I slurred it a little and then yawned. "I must be going," I said.

"Have just one more for the road."

"No, thank you—enough for one night."

To my surprise he made no further effort to detain me, and soon I was being shown downstairs.

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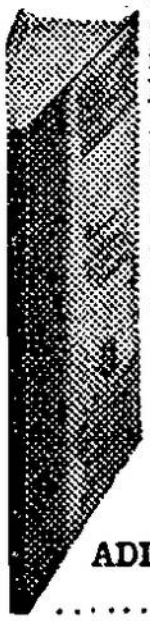

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Deliberately, I stumbled twice and my thanks for such a delightful evening were disjointed and mumbled. Soulimain was most solicitous: "You are tired," he said, with a smile I did not like. "I am sure you will sleep well."

The driver of the waiting truck seemed to have some difficulty in getting me aboard; as we made off down the drive, I slumped in the seat beside him. He did not say a word—but it was very apparent that he did not approve of drunken field officers. After leaving the gate, the road to Shiraz ran for some distance along the outside wall of the garden. We covered a few hundred yards, and then I sat up straight and told the driver to stop.

"It's all right, Corporal, I'm not drunk—that was an act for the benefit of my host. Do you know where I am billeted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right—now this is what you have got to do. First, get out and pretend to help me towards the wall. Then, when we see the coast is clear, give me a leg up over it. I want to see something inside."

He grinned—he thought the "something" was a woman.

"After that," I continued, "you are to beat it straight back to my billet; find either Major Brooks or Captain Hervey and tell them what I have done. Say that if I am not back with them by eight in the morning, they are to come up here and tear the place apart to find me."

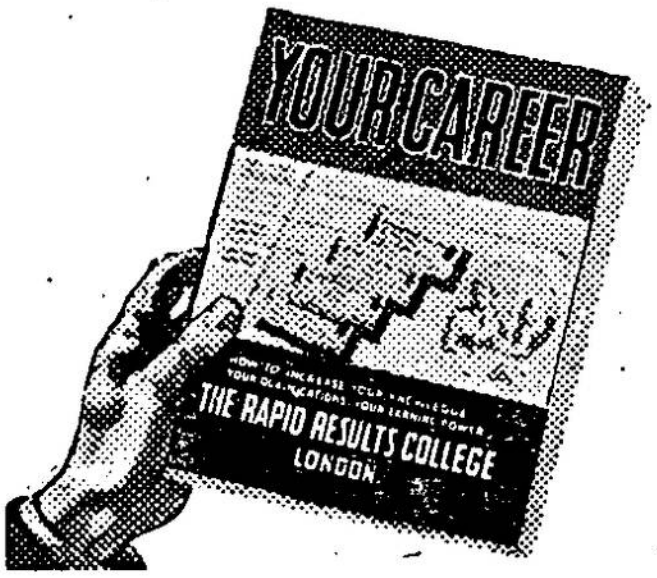
"All right, sir." I could see by his face that he still thought it was a woman.

The wall was higher than I had judged, but with the Corporal standing on the bonnet, I managed to gain the top from his shoulders. With a whispered "Get cracking," I dropped down among the dead leaves of the thicket on the other side. Soon the noise of the truck died away towards Shiraz; it was dark in the undergrowth and quiet save for the sound of the nightingales.

Keeping in the shadow of the bushes, I traversed the length of the garden, first back to the house and then to where the two avenues intersected at the little pavilion. The big house seemed to be in darkness, but with no cover round the "mirror" pool I dared not go too close. In the little pavilion a dim light was burning in the centre room; it showed feebly against the moon, now turned from yellow to silver and almost as bright as day.

I waited there in the shadows for more than half an hour, getting colder and colder and beginning to feel somewhat foolish. Nothing happened. I wondered if anything would, or if everything had been my imagination. Soulimain's efforts with the chloral had been real enough—I would have been put to bed as a drunk, nicely out of his way until the next morning. I wondered how I could explain my presence if someone found me. I had just started to think about climbing out, when things started to move.

First a car came down the road from the direction of the town and turned up the drive; the lights in the big house flickered on and off, then ten minutes later a group of figures came down the avenue towards the little pavilion. There were five of them.



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I drew back; lying deep in the shadow, I watched and waited; they passed within a few yards of me and I could see them quite clearly in the moonlight.

There was Soulimain and his nephew; the other three were Europeans—two fair, but one of these a head and shoulders taller than any of the others. The slanting moonlight made his gaunt face look more like a skull than ever. Without speaking, they passed me and entered the little house. The door closed.

I suppose that I then gave a classic example of how not to go about the business of eavesdropping. I was so pleased that I was right—so glad that I had not got chilled to the bone for nothing—so eager to hear all that was going on, that I gave no thought to anything but attaining this object. Dodging from shadow to shadow, I was soon beneath the Judas tree, with only five yards of moonlight separating me from the corner of the verandah from which I could see into the room.

Keyed for the last dash, I did not hear a thing; then, without warning, something hard and blunt was jabbed into the small of my back. A voice, coming from somewhere behind my left ear said in English: "Good evening, Major."

I stood still, while my stomach turned over and over; the same voice had said exactly the same words on the telephone that night in my darkened office in Ahwaz.

Then it continued: "Raise your hands slowly and clasp them

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behind your head." I did so. "Now start walking—remember this is a gun in your back and I would love to use it."

I walked; the pressure did not relax and soon we were facing a small door in the pavilion.

"The key." Something cold touched one of my hands. "Take it and unlock the door."

I opened the door; the room inside was small and dusty. A square of moonlight shone on the floor from the barred window. I could not see any furniture.

The voice came again, mocking: "Why can't your Colonel bother to train you better? When spying, it is an elementary precaution to ensure that you, in your turn, are not spied on. I came out of the back door to make certain we were not going to be disturbed; and there you were. Your type exasperates me, Major, an amateur and a nuisance. Surely I am worthy of better metal."

There was nothing to say; I felt humiliated because he was right about the lack of care, angry at being brushed aside as a beginner.

The mocking voice went on: "So you decided against the study-of-latrines-in-Haifa. What made you come here instead?"

I stilled the schoolboy retort that welled up about the Friends of Iran being a better field of study of drains and their contents. I would need all my brains now without wasting them on rudery.

"I obey orders," I said.

The gun jabbed me again hard. "What are you doing in Shiraz?"

"Delivering vehicles to the Persians."

"And—?"

"Nothing else."

There was a pause; then the voice almost purred: "I want the key to your cipher. Don't try to be brave and stupid—I can make you talk, you know."

I stared straight at the moonlight in the window.

"I'll tell you two things," I said. "The first is that if I am not back in Shiraz by a certain time, everyone there will be out to look for me and they know where I am. Secondly, if I do not get back by the dead-line, the cipher will be considered compromised and a new key will be issued to all concerned."

It was the best I could do—the only bluff I could think of.

The gun moved and an instant later there was a smashing blow on the back of my head—a blinding light—and I was falling . . . falling . . . into darkness.

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No. 11

★

Rules of Entry on page 107

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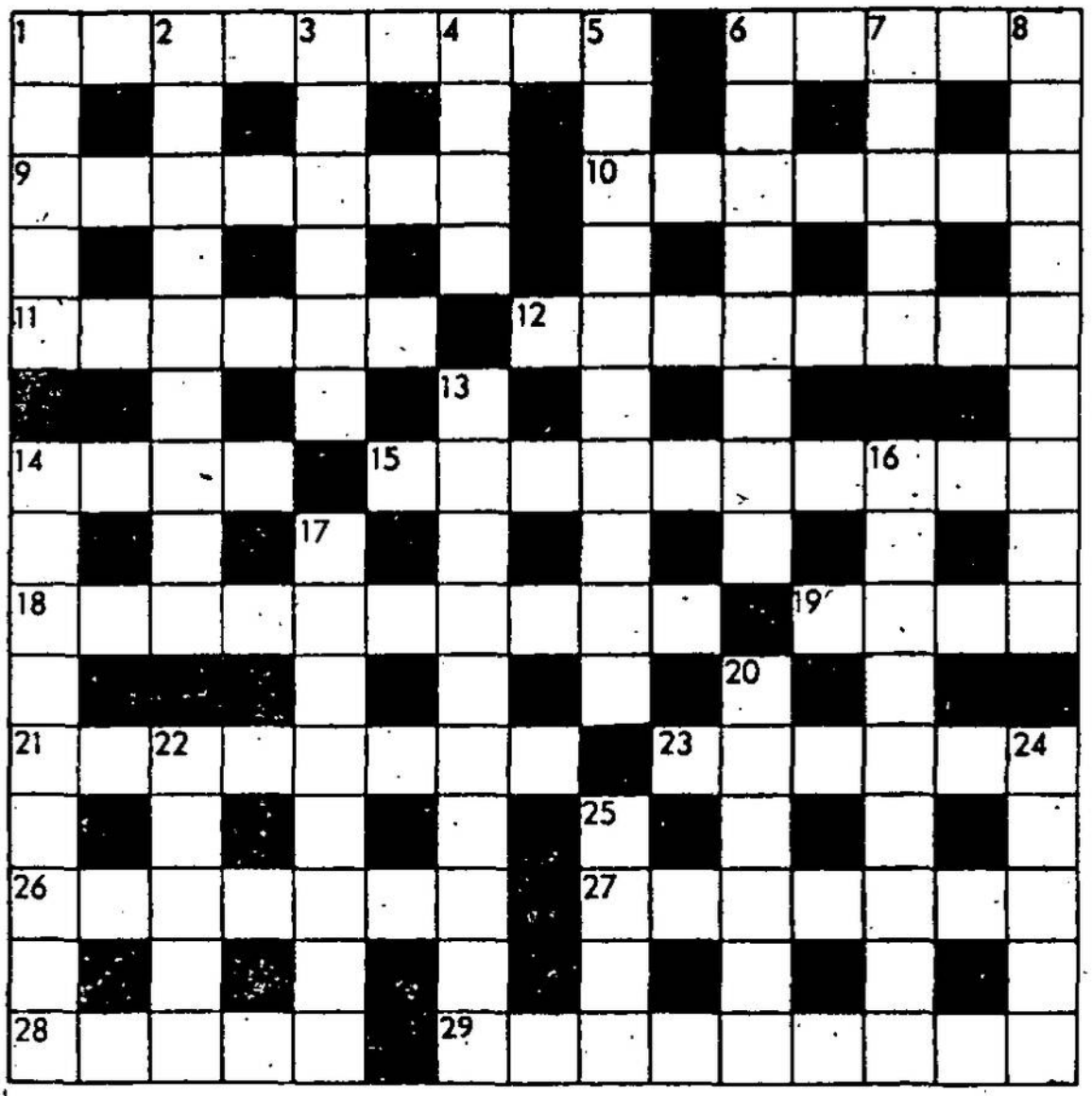

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CLUES

Across

1 This uncomplicated heavyweight is rather a stupid fellow, on the whole (9).

6 Flowery Shakespearian heroine (5).

9 Five hundred and an editor make a French philosopher (7).

10 Old-fashioned, and coy to start with (7).

11 Half a high London admiral is useful in wrestling (6).

12 Inferior to kind hearts, said Tennyson (8).

14 A terrible Russian (4).

15 Member of the Cabinet in charge of publicity ? (10).

18 It sounds as if it's out for blood on the cricket-field (7, 3).

19 Chilly salutation (4).

21 People are said to go on from it to it (8).

23 "—— breeds without the law" (Kipling) (6).

26 A backward ram on the hillside makes this Highland gathering (7).

27 If a thing's this, it may well be untrue (3, 4).

28 "And this was scarcely odd because They'd —— every one" (Lewis Carroll) (5).

29 In the South, merriment takes on a lethal significance (9).

Down

1 Just the battle for a chairborne general (5).

2 Mannequins don't form part of the livestock here ! (5, 4).

3 To entice involves changing no rule (4, 2).

4 Rum children (4).

5 Sunburn follows spilt oil when the tide is lowest (10).

6 Royal station (8).

7 Remové rod backwards for the transformed toreador to speak (5).

8 Stare, clan, at something connected with your forbears (9).

13 They are proverbially to the adventurous (10).

14 Ibis, Nevil—can't you see it ? (9).

16 Rapturous conveyance (9).

17 The spice begins with a Roman conspirator (8).

20 Appertain, as Jack might have said to the beanstalk (6).

22 In the hydro, a stove evidently contains the joint (5).

24 Horsey adjunct to a geometrical theorem (5).

25 The volcano could be tidy (4).

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